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Preface

It is a melancholy truth, whispered in the empty curva of Italian football, that the fantasista – that sublime number 10, the artist who painted with a ball, the genius who lived on flair and wonder – has almost completely disappeared from Serie A. His was not a sudden departure, but a slow and tragic decline, the offspring of a poisoned cocktail of modern tactical obsessions, economic desperation, and a cultural oblivion that has forgotten how to nurture magic.

The deepest wound is self-inflicted, a consequence of the way the game is played now. Italian football, once a stage for geniuses, has become a sterile temple devoted to athleticism and organization. The first and most devastating blow is the demand for tactical sacrifice above all else. As commentator Nando Orsi laments, the modern fantasista is an extinct species because he has become a burden. He can play well one game and poorly the next, simply because his heart doesn't race for defensive drudgery. Modern doctrine demands that

every player, regardless of their talent, be a soldier in the machine of collective pressing. There is no room for a player granted the freedom to roam, to wait, to create. That freedom is now seen as a tactical sin.

This leads to the second, heartbreaking reality: the death of creative freedom. Alessandro Del Piero, one of the last princes of that role, observed with sadness that the young players who now wear the iconic number 10 shirt are no longer artists; they are chess pieces. They are forced into rigid, pre-set patterns from a young age, their natural instincts to dribble, to improvise, to attempt the impossible, sacrificed on the altar of tactical discipline. The game has paradoxically become slower and more predictable. Despite the obsession with athleticism, data shows a Serie A that is less intense than other leagues, creating a lethargic, robotic style where there is no oxygen for the sudden, brilliant flash of a fantasista's invention.

Beyond the green rectangle, the economic reality of Italian football is a tragedy of missed opportunities and fading grandeur. The great exodus of talent is a wound that bleeds the league of its soul. The Premier League and La Liga are now the glittering destinations for the best in the world. Del Piero's words hang like a funereal epitaph: the strongest, the greatest, no longer come here. They go to England, to Spain, even to France or Germany. Italian clubs, oppressed by debt and watching their television revenues dwarfed by foreign rivals, simply cannot afford to keep or acquire the kind of genius that once defined them. They are left to pick over the scraps of a global market they no longer dominate.

In their poverty, they made a desperate and shortsighted pact. The system incentivized the importation of a tide of mediocre foreign players – ghost footballers who filled squad places but offered no magic. This invasion, facilitated by tax breaks, created an insurmountable wall for young Italian talents, slamming the door in the face of the next generation of potential Baggios and Tottis before they could even knock. Cash-strapped clubs found it economically "convenient" to buy a cheap, functional foreigner rather than invest time and money in cultivating their own. The funds needed to develop youth sectors, those gardens where fantasists should bloom, were instead diverted to plug financial holes. They sacrificed the future for a precarious present.

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching reason for this decline lies not in professional football, but in the dusty backyards and parish playgrounds where legends were once forged. Italy's approach to nurturing its youth has lost its way, trading soul for system. Coach Gigi

Cagni pointed an accusatory finger precisely at the youth sectors, arguing that they actively suppress imagination. They no longer cultivate wingers or attacking midfielders with imagination. From a tender age, teaching is focused on rigid patterns and physical development, systematically suffocating that very inventiveness and dribbling ability that define the fantasista. The campetto, the unstructured games where skill was honed through pure joy and competition, has been replaced by bureaucratized football schools, often under-resourced and under pressure to win trophies rather than to shape artists.

This is the story of a culture that has forgotten how to let talent breathe. Young footballers now grow up under the crushing weight of media saturation and an insatiable demand for immediate results. This relentless pressure creates an environment hostile to genius, where a risky nutmeg or a bold back heel are gambles no one dares to take anymore. Spontaneity is coached out of them, replaced by a fearful conformity.

And yet, in this grey landscape, a glimmer of hope remains, though it is a hope steeped in sadness. The pure fantasista, the carefree genius, is gone. In his place, a new archetype struggles to be born. Players like Nico Paz or Mattia Zaccagni offer glimpses of the old magic, but they are hybrids – talented, certainly, but also built for modern football. They possess the necessary athletic frame to sacrifice and fit into the collective machine, their moments of brilliance fleeting sparks in a sea of tactical order. They are memories of what was lost, proof that the DNA for brilliance still exists, but it is now a bird in a cage, forced to sing a different, more disciplined song.

The challenge for Italian football is a double mourning: to remember and to rebuild. It must find a way to reverse the trend in its youth sectors, to tear down the walls built by mediocre foreigners and economic fears, to create the conditions where a new generation of pure talents can not only emerge but be loved. It must somehow find the courage to bring back some of that magic that once made Serie A the most enchanting league in the world. If it fails, the silence where once roared a fan's passion for the genius of a number 10 will only become more deafening and desolate.

What a poignant paradox: the very hands that should have protected the flame of spectacle have, almost without realizing it, smothered one of its purest expressions. FIFA and UEFA, wielding their regulations like sacred laws, have designed a new world where the fantasista – that rebellious number 10, free from schemes – has become an

unwelcome guest, a stateless person of football. There was no official condemnation, no verdict read in court. It was much worse: they erased him with the indifference of bureaucracy, with technical reports that speak only of athletic machines and have forgotten the vocabulary of art.

The first blow came silently, in the form of a missed opportunity. At the turn of the 2000s and 2010s, Sepp Blatter's FIFA tried to launch the "6+5" idea: a rule that would have forced teams to field at least six players trained in their own country. A perhaps clumsy, perhaps demagogic attempt, but one with an ancient heart: to give identity back to clubs and air to the youth sectors. Europe, however, branded it discriminatory, and the dream came to nothing. And without that constraint, the market continued to drain the leagues like a river in flood, washing away fertile soil and leaving only functional foreigners, players who were right for the role but without an iota of poetry. Those Italian boys who dreamed of wearing the number 10 found themselves facing a wall. And that wall, in the end, was also built on the ground left empty by a rule that never saw the light of day.

And while FIFA lost that battle, UEFA won another, more insidious one: that of redefining the very concept of talent. Its technical reports, read as gospels by coaches around the world, stopped celebrating dribbling, unpredictability, the play that invents space from nothing. Now numbers are exalted: pure speed, sprints into depth, the 37 km/h of a centre-forward running straight like a train. A player is no longer valued for what he can invent, but for how much he grinds out in athletic terms. And in this universe of spread sheets and bar charts, the fantasista – who made few sprints but weighty ones, laden with meaning – becomes an anomaly, an outlier that no algorithm can interpret.

But the most painful wound, the one that still hurts, is another. It is FIFA's refusal to let the number 10 become eternal. Argentina twice asked to retire it: first for Maradona, then for Messi. They wanted that shirt, steeped in poetry and genius, to never be worn by anyone else, as is done with flags in museums. And twice FIFA said no. Because the regulations, those cold and inflexible ones, say that in a World Cup the numbers must go from 1 to 23, with no gaps. Retiring the 10 would mean presenting a list with a hole, and bureaucracy does not tolerate holes.

There is something poetically tragic in this image. The same FIFA that in 1992 made football more spectacular by banning the goalkeeper from handling the ball on a back-pass, now says that magic cannot be

frozen. That the number 10 must remain in circulation, even at the cost of becoming a soulless badge. So, while Argentina dreamed of preserving a legacy, FIFA imposed its dispersal, forcing someone else tomorrow to wear that weight, without having the stature for it.

And so, looking back with the eyes of one who loved that football, one cannot help but think that the end of the fantasista in Serie A was not only the fault of tactics or red ink on balance sheets. It was also a betrayal from above, a lack of courage and vision on the part of those who govern the game. They failed to protect talents with rules. They stopped celebrating them in their reports. They even denied peoples the right to honor them as they deserved. And in the end, the fantasista was left alone. A bird in a cage, in a stadium that applauds numbers and has forgotten poetry.

1

So, the Number 10: once he was a god, now what do we have?

Do you remember when you were a kid dreaming of playing football? No one wanted to be the goalkeeper, that was always the worst player's job. The defender? Stuff for gentle giants. The dream, the real dream, was the number 10. The shirt of the phenomenon, the genius, the one who with a single play could lift you off your sofa. Often the captain too, mind you.

Today? Today, that dream has faded a bit. Numbers are handed out at random, guys walk around with 99 like it's a supermarket price tag. The pure fantasista has been buried under tactical demands, and in Serie A the 10 just gets slapped on whoever's around, maybe even some foreigner who'll be gone tomorrow.

Let's talk about one of the most loved and romantic figures in Italian football: the Fantasista – or if you prefer, the Trequartista. He's not simply a number 10. He's much more. He's the team's artist, the creative genius, the one who moves in that magical zone between midfield and attack, what we call the "three-quarter zone."

Throughout the history of Italian football, this role has had true masters, legends who painted masterpieces on the pitch. But what makes a Fantasista unique? Let's look at his characteristics, told through those who interpreted them best.

But what was it like back in the day?

In the 70s, fixed numbers didn't even exist! They changed game by game, and the 10 went to the strongest guy, the playmaker, the top scorer. The most important role, basically.

Check out this list:

- Inter: Sandro Mazzola – captain, penalty taker, lord of the pitch.
- Milan: Gianni Rivera – the "Golden Boy," the god of Italian football.
- Napoli: Antonio Juliano – prince of midfield, class.
- Juventus: Roberto Bettega – talented striker, a force of nature.
- Cagliari: Gigi Riva – "Rombo di Tuono" (Thunderclap), sacred monster.
- Roma: Franco Cordova – heart and brains.
- Lazio: Giorgio Chinaglia – goalscorer, titan.
- Bologna: Günther Netzer – long-haired German, infinite class.
- Fiorentina: Kurt Hamrin – Swedish legend.
- Vicenza: Paolo Pulici – young gunner.

That year was a bridge between catenaccio and modern football. The 10 was the absolute creative force, the man you built everything around.

Then Platini arrives and changes everything (1980-81)

Ten years later, look at these names:

- Juventus: Michel Platini – the French King, goals, assists, genius.

- Roma: Roberto Pruzzo – a striker with the fantasista's number.

- Inter: Evaristo Beccalossi – "The Magician," pure unpredictable talent.

- Milan: Aldo Maldera – incredible but true: a left-back with the 10!

- Fiorentina: Giancarlo Antognoni – the Lord of Fiorentina, pure elegance.

See the shift? The great foreigner arrives (Platini), but there are still Italian flags. The 10 is still a sacred role.

And today? What do we have today?

Today numbers are fixed and the role is in a coma. Look at this stuff:

- Milan: Leão (winger)

- Inter: Lautaro (striker)

- Juve: Yıldız (talented, but a striker)

- Napoli: No one

- Roma: No one

- Lazio: Zaccagni (winger)

- Bologna: Bernardeschi

- Fiorentina: Guðmundsson (striker)

- Torino: Vlašić

- Monza: Cutrone (striker)

- Genoa: Messias (winger)

- Como: Nico Paz (midfielder)

- Parma: Bernabé (midfielder)

I'll tell you the truth: compare this stuff with the lists from before. Do you get goose bumps, or do you feel like falling asleep?

Once there were Rivera, Mazzola, Maradona, Antognoni. Legends, symbols. Today we have guys who are often here for the contract, not for the shirt. With due exceptions, eh.

The only one who gives me hope is that boy from Como, Nico Paz. He's the one with the touch, the vision... the makings of a true 10. On the others, for now, I have my Hamlet-like doubts. Too bad he's not Italian.

The lists of the past were like Panini sticker albums of dreams. Every name a story, a piece of magic. The 10 was a promise of spectacle.

Today it's more of a brand, a memory. Luckily every now and then a kid like Paz pops up who tries to play as a true playmaker... and then maybe a thread of that dream is still alive. For the rest, we cling to memories. To the times of giants.

2

And speaking of giants, let's talk about the Seven Sisters.

The Seven Sisters! It gives you chills, anyone with even a hint of nostalgia for Italian football. A mythical era, the 90s and early 2000s, when seven teams dominated not just at home but also in Europe.

Who were they?

1. Juventus
2. Milan
3. Inter
4. Roma
5. Lazio
6. Fiorentina
7. Parma

(Naples and Sampdoria would join in every now and then, but this was the core).

Why was it a golden age?

Serie A was the richest league in the world. The presidents (Berlusconi, Moratti, Cragnotti, Tanzi) threw money around like it was raining. There was no Premier League or PSG that could compete.

If a player was great, he played in Italy. Full stop.

Try this game: pick a lineup from the Seven Sisters of the mid-90s. It looks like a FIFA dream team:

- Milan: Baresi, Maldini, Van Basten, Gullit, Rijkaard, Weah.
- Juve: Del Piero, Zidane, Davids, Deschamps, Vialli.
- Inter: Ronaldo (the Phenomenon!), Zanetti, Djorkaeff.
- Lazio: Nedvěd, Salas, Verón, Mihajlović.

- Parma: Buffon, Thuram, Cannavaro, Crespo.
- Roma: Totti, Batistuta, Cafu, Aldair.
- Fiorentina: Batistuta, Rui Costa, Toldo.

The derbies were like Champions League finals in advance. And in Europe? All-Italian finals: Juve-Fiorentina in the UEFA Cup, Milan-Juve in the Champions League, Parma-Juve, Lazio-Mallorca... insane stuff.

So what happened? Why did it end?

1. Financial Crashes: Parmalat, Cirio, the bubble burst. Fiorentina and Parma went bankrupt.
2. The Bosman Ruling
3. The Rise of the Premier League
4. Calciopoli (2006)

3.

FINANCIAL CRASHES: WHO WAS CRAGNOTTI? THE "LORD" OF LAZIO

To understand the story, we have to go back to the 90s. There was a Roman financier named Sergio Cragnotti. In 1992, he bought Lazio and transformed it into a powerhouse team.

Cragnotti wasn't just any businessman: he was someone who spent

without looking. He brought players to Rome like:

- Nesta

- Nedvěd

- Verón

- Salas

- Mihajlović

- Crespo

With him, Lazio won 7 trophies in 5 years: one scudetto (2000), two Coppa Italias, two Italian Supercups, one Cup Winners' Cup, and one European Super Cup. It seemed like a dream.

THE CIRIO COMPANY: THE PEAS EVERYONE KNEW

Cragnotti was also the head of Cirio, the company that produced peeled tomatoes, peas, and preserves. A historic Italian brand, founded in 1856, that everyone had in their pantry.

In 1994, Cragnotti bought Cirio for 450 billion lire. From then on, he began using the company as a personal ATM.

THE CRASH: HOW DID THE CASE EXPLODE?

The Bond Mechanism

To raise cash, Cirio started selling bonds. Simply put: they were like loans that Cirio asked savers for, promising to repay the money with interest after a few years.

Banks advised their clients (often pensioners and families) to buy these securities as if they were "safe investments."

The Default (2002-2003)

In November 2002, Cirio failed to pay a 150 million euro bond. Then, in 2003, with an official statement, it announced it could not repay the bonds.

The hole was 1.125 billion euros.

WHERE DID THE SAVERS' MONEY GO? (THE CONNECTION WITH LAZIO)

Here comes the most incredible part.

The judiciary discovered that 190 million euros taken from Cirio's coffers had ended up... in Lazio!

What's more, to pay the scudetto bonuses to Lazio's players in 2000, funds embezzled from the Cirio group companies (Cirio Holding and Cirio Finanziaria) were used.

Translated simply:

The savers who had bought Cirio bonds (often without knowing it) had paid the salaries and bonuses of Mihajlović, Crespo, and company.

Lazio fans celebrated the scudetto, but that money didn't come from company profits: it was the savings of ordinary people, who then lost everything.

THE ROLE OF THE BANKS

Big bankers were also involved in the story.

Cesare Geronzi, former president of Banca di Roma (later Capitalia), was sentenced to 4 years for his role in the affair. According to the accusation, the banks knew perfectly well that Cirio was sinking, but they continued to have savers buy bonds to keep the system afloat.

Geronzi always defended himself by saying he had "acted correctly as a banker."

THE SENTENCES

The trial lasted for years. In the end, the people involved and their sentences:

- Sergio Cragnotti: 5 years and 3 months (final in 2021)

- Cesare Geronzi: 4 years (final in 2017)

- Andrea Cragnotti (son): 2 years and 4 months

- Filippo Fucile (son-in-law): 3 years and 10 months

- Other family members: Minor sentences or statute of limitations

Cragnotti ended up in Regina Coeli prison in February 2004. He was arrested at his estate in Montepulciano.

THE VICTIMS: THE SAVERS

The saddest part is the victims:

- Over 35,000 savers lost their money

- Only 13,000 joined as civil plaintiffs

- Many were elderly people who had invested their life savings

- The banks were ordered to pay compensation, but it took years

- An interim compensation of 200 million euros was imposed on Unicredit and the convicted individuals.

HOW WAS LAZIO SAVED?

Lazio risked bankruptcy. How did it save itself?

1. The Baraldi Plan: a manager arrived (Luca Baraldi) who invented a plan to pay the players' salaries partly in cash and partly with Lazio shares.

2. "Spalmadebiti" Decree: the government passed a law allowing football teams to spread their debts over 10 years.

3. Claudio Lotito: in 2004, Lotito bought Lazio and "spread" their tax debts over 23 years.

IN SUMMARY: THE LESSON OF THE CIRIO CASE

- Cragnotti: A president who spent like crazy for Lazio.

- Cirio: The family company that sold peeled tomatoes.

- Bonds: Loans requested from savers.

- The Money: Ended up buying champions and paying Lazio's salaries.

- The Crash: The company failed, savers lost everything.

- The Banks: Had sold those securities even knowing they were at risk.

- Lazio: Was saved by a miracle thanks to special laws.

In the end, Lazio fans had lived a dream (the scudetto, the champions), but that dream had been paid for with the money of thousands of families who found themselves without a euro.

If Cirio was a 1 billion euro hole, Parmalat was a lunar crater: a 14 billion euro hole.

Here's the simple, conversational explanation of the Parmalat-Parma Case, the largest European financial crash.

WHO WAS TANZI? THE KING OF MILK

Calisto Tanzi was an entrepreneur from Parma who, in the 60s, inherited a small ham and tomato business from his father. He decided to bet everything on milk, inventing Parmalat, the brand we all have in our fridges.

In the 80s and 90s, Tanzi became extremely powerful. He created an empire with:

- Factories in 30 countries

- 36,000 employees

- Dizzying turnover

He was so famous they called him "the king of milk." Politicians, bankers, businessmen all revolved around him.

TANZI AND PARMA: THE FAIRY TALE

In 1990, Tanzi bought Parma Calcio and began one of the most beautiful stories in Italian football.

With his money, Parma went from anonymity to winning:

- 3 UEFA Cups (1995, 1999)

- 1 Cup Winners' Cup (1993)

- 2 European Super Cups

- 3 Coppa Italias

- 1 Italian Supercup

Players who made you dream:

- Buffon

- Thuram

- Cannavaro

- Crespo

- Verón

- Zola

- Asprilla

A provincial team that beat the greats of Europe. A fairy tale.

THE CRASH: HOW IT ALL BLEW UP

The Hidden Holes

Behind the facade, however, Parmalat was a gigantic bubble. Tanzi used the company as a personal ATM.

The numbers had been rigged for years:

- Debts hidden in tax havens (Cayman, Antilles)

- Fake invoices to inflate revenues

- A 14 billion euro hole – the largest financial crash in European history

To help you understand: 14 billion is more than the GDP of many countries. Crazy stuff.

The Discovery (December 2003)

On December 19, 2003, the Bank of Italy realized that 4 billion euros that Parmalat claimed to have in an account in the Cayman Islands... didn't exist.

It was all a setup. The auditors from Grant Thornton had been certifying false balance sheets for years.

The Arrest

On December 27, 2003, Tanzi was arrested in Milan while trying to flee. From "king of milk" to a man in handcuffs in a few days.

WHAT HAPPENS TO PARMA CALCIO?

Parma Calcio found itself orphaned overnight. That team which had won all over Europe was up for sale like an item at the supermarket. The players were auctioned off to raise cash.

The Rescue Attempts

The club changed hands repeatedly:

1. Bondi (Parmalat's extraordinary commissioner) looked for buyers.

2. A local entrepreneur, Tommaso Ghirardi, arrived.

3. Parma continued to stay afloat, but without the money of before.

The Second Bankruptcy (2015)

In 2015, after years of shaky management, Parma fails again.

The situation was dramatic:

- The Primavera (youth) players showered with cold water.

- Medical equipment was seized.

- The club had 242 contracts with players scattered around, many of them paid and never seen, described as being "of advanced age."

The Restart

Unlike Fiorentina and Napoli, which had benefited from the "Lodo Petrucci" (a law allowing failed clubs to restart from a lower division), that law was abolished in 2014.

The new Parma (S.S.D. Parma Calcio 1913) had to restart from Serie D.

THE ROLE OF THE BANKS

As with Cirio, the banks were involved here too.

Tanzi told investigators that the banks:

- Knew about the holes.

- Kept lending him money because he was "too big to fail."

- Made a fortune in commissions.

A rotten system where bankers and businessmen propped each other

up, until the collapse.

THE SENTENCES

The trial lasted for years. In the end:

- Calisto Tanzi: 8 years and 1 month (reduced on appeal).

He said in court: "I ruined my city, my family, and my employees. It's the weight I carry inside me."

Tanzi was released from prison in 2013 for health reasons. He died in 2022, at the age of 83.

- Other executives: Sentences from 2 to 7 years.

- Grant Thornton: Ordered to pay damages.

What makes the Grant Thornton case so serious is that they betrayed their role. They weren't Tanzi's employees, they weren't Parmalat's managers. They were the external auditors, the ones who were supposed to guarantee that the accounts were true. Instead, they became active participants in the swindle.

The American judge Lewis Kaplan, who followed the case in the United States, called the Parmalat fraud "one of the most brazen corporate financial frauds in history." And Grant Thornton, along with Tanzi and the others, was complicit.

THE VICTIMS

The victims were countless:

- Over 100,000 savers who had bought Parmalat bonds.

- 36,000 employees who lost their jobs.

- Suppliers who were never paid.

- The entire city of Parma, which lost its symbol.

PARMA TODAY

Fortunately, Parma's story didn't end there. Today the club:

- Is back in Serie A.

- Has American ownership (Krause Group).

- Is trying to rebuild without the "craziness" of the 90s.

But the golden era of Buffon, Thuram, and Cannavaro will never return. That fairy tale was written with money that didn't exist.

Fiorentina

Fiorentina (2002): fails, is not admitted to Serie B, restarts from C2 with a new name (Florentia Viola). One of the saddest chapters.

Here is the simple explanation of the Fiorentina-Cecchi Gori Case, the third major crash of the Seven Sisters.

WHO WAS CECCHI GORI? THE "PRINCE" OF CINEMA AND FOOTBALL

Vittorio Cecchi Gori was a unique figure in the Italian landscape: a successful film producer, a senator, and the owner of Fiorentina. His father, Mario Cecchi Gori, had built an empire in cinema, producing films with the sacred monsters of Italian comedy.

When his father died in 1993, Vittorio inherited:

- One of the most important Italian production companies.

- The presidency of Fiorentina (becoming the 17th president in the Viola's history).

In cinema, Cecchi Gori had reached the pinnacle: he won two Oscars as a producer, for Il Postino and Mediterraneo. He was an extremely powerful man, who frequented high society and had political friendships at the highest levels.

CECCHI GORI AND FIORENTINA: THE GOLDEN YEARS

With him at the helm, Fiorentina lived through a memorable era. Cecchi Gori spent without regard to cost, building a scudetto-caliber team.

The champions who made Florence dream:

- Gabriel Batistuta – the "Lion King," absolute symbol.

- Manuel Rui Costa – Portuguese genius, pure number 10.

- Edmundo – "The Animal," phenomenal but controversial Brazilian.

- Francesco Toldo – National team goalkeeper.

- Stefan Schwarz, Luis Oliveira, Anselmo Robbiati.

Fiorentina competed on equal footing with the greats, won two Coppa Italias (1996 and 2001) and one Italian Supercup (1996). Fans dreamed of the scudetto they had missed since 1969.

THE CRASH: HOW THE DISASTER BEGAN

The First Signs (1998-1999)

According to the magistrates' reconstruction, the economic decline began in September 1998.

Cecchi Gori carried out a complicated financial operation: Fiorentina sold to the American investment bank Merrill Lynch all future revenues it would have up until 2010:

- Season tickets

- Match tickets

- Television rights

In exchange, it obtained financing of 67.5 billion lire.

The Trick: Where Did the Money Go?

That money, however, did not stay with Fiorentina. It was immediately diverted to other companies in the Cecchi Gori group, particularly Fin.Mavi spa and Regal srl, which were in financial trouble.

Fiorentina was used as a "continuous cash register" to plug the debts of the group's other companies.

Similar Operations

In 1999-2000, Fiorentina obtained another 70 billion from Faber Factor, which ended up the same way in the coffers of the other companies. Even the money received from terminating Edmundo's contract (27 billion) was diverted elsewhere.

The result? Fiorentina accrued 155 billion lire in debt, but those debts were in the club's name, while the money had ended up in other companies that never repaid anything.

THE FREE FALL (2001-2002)

June 2001: The Bomb

On June 26, 2001, Fiorentina's auditing board announced a hole of 316 billion lire. Enough to make your blood run cold.

The next day, the court opened bankruptcy proceedings.

July 2001: Searches

On July 5, Cecchi Gori's luxurious Roman residence in Palazzo Borghese was searched. In the safe, they found a white powder – he said it was "just saffron." He was in the company of Valeria Marini, his companion at the time.

On July 9, he officially left the presidency of Fiorentina.

Attempts to Save the Sinking Ship

Between 2001 and 2002, there was a carousel of potential buyers: Tootonchi, Preziosi, Cavalli, various consortiums. No one concluded anything.

Cecchi Gori tried to scrape together money:

- In November 2001, he sold the rights to some films to Medusa for 40 billion, used to pay part of the overdue salaries and income tax (Irpef).

- He signed personal promissory notes.

- He placed mortgages on Palazzo Borghese.

But it was too late.

THE END OF FIORENTINA (2002)

Relegation and Fan Revolt

April 14, 2002: Fiorentina was relegated to Serie B after a disastrous championship.

April 18: 30,000 fans took to the streets in Florence with a torchlight procession against Cecchi Gori. The city was exasperated.

Judicial Administration

June 5, 2002: the court appointed a judicial administrator, Professor Enrico Fazzini, with the task of restructuring the finances. Cecchi Gori and his advisors were removed.

Fazzini found himself facing a desperate situation.

The Composition Proposal

On September 24, 2002, Fiorentina applied for admission to composition with creditors (concordato preventivo), a procedure that avoids bankruptcy if an agreement with creditors is found.

But the court rejected it the same day for "manifest lack of prerequisites." About 70 billion were needed to pay the creditors, and there were no serious guarantees.

The Bankruptcy

September 27, 2002: the court of Florence officially declared the bankruptcy of AC Fiorentina.

The debts were estimated at over 200 billion lire (later recalculated at around 100 million euros). There would be almost 250 creditors.

THE FAILURE TO REGISTER FOR THE CHAMPIONSHIP

The real death blow came shortly before.

April 30, 2002: Covisoc (the supervisory commission) rejected Fiorentina's accounts, putting registration for the Serie B championship at risk.

July 23: Fiorentina was not registered. They needed 22 million euros by July 29 to settle their position.

The Colombian Fax (An Absurd Story)

Cecchi Gori, through his lawyers, let it be known that he would find the money within 24 hours.

At the end of July, a fax even arrived from Colombia announcing the imminent arrival of 22 million euros from a Colombian bank to save the team.

Too bad the fax turned out to be completely false.

August 1, 2002: the federal council, seeing no money arrive, formalized Fiorentina's non-registration for Serie B. The team simply... disappeared.

THE BIRTH OF FLORENTIA VIOLA

After Fiorentina's disappearance, the city mobilized.

The entrepreneur Diego Della Valle (founder of the Tod's group) stepped forward to refound the team. Thus, Florentia Viola was born.

Special Treatment?

Here, something particular happened. Normally, a team that fails restarts from the amateur leagues. Instead, Florentia Viola was admitted directly to Serie C2 (i.e., among the professionals).

The president of Lega Pro, Mario Macalli, openly called it "a great gift."

On condition that it take on the debts of the old Fiorentina to the "Players' and Coaches' Guarantee Fund." Della Valle accepted.

Someone pointed out the injustice: teams like Brindisi, Catania, Livorno, Ravenna, Taranto, and Pisa, in the same situation, had had to restart from the amateur leagues. Why Florentia? Because it was considered an "expression of the city of Florence."

The substance was clear to everyone: Florentia Viola was Fiorentina's heir, even if officially it couldn't be said.

THE BRAND AND THE CREDITORS

Meanwhile, an entrepreneur named Valentino Rizzuto registered the "Fiorentina" brand with the Chamber of Commerce in Perugia.

This created a real problem: anyone wanting to buy the brand at the bankruptcy auction would have to face a long legal battle with Rizzuto, and would therefore offer less money. A loss for the creditors.

LEGAL CONSEQUENCES FOR CECCHI GORI

The Arrest

October 29, 2002: Vittorio Cecchi Gori was placed under house arrest for fraudulent bankruptcy.

That morning, agents knocked on the door of Palazzo Borghese at 7 am. No answer from inside, just a dog barking. Cecchi Gori wouldn't open. After more than two hours, they had to call the fire department to force the door.

With him was Valeria Marini, who said: "Leave me in my grief."

He was accused of transferring 70 billion from Fiorentina to Finmavi,

his personal finance company.

The Convictions

Over the years, the convictions accumulated:

- 2013 (February): sentenced to 6 years for the Safim crash.

- 2013 (October): sentenced to 7 years for the Finmavi crash (a 600 million bankruptcy).

- For the Fiorentina bankruptcy, he received 3 years and 4 months in criminal proceedings.

The Civil Sentence (2019)

In September 2019, the civil court of Florence ordered him to pay 19,075,000 euros to the bankruptcy estate.

The judges wrote that he was the "sole responsible party" for Fiorentina's bankruptcy. All the other administrators (Mario Sconcerti, Ottavio Bianchi, Luciano Luna) were instead acquitted.

Cecchi Gori's lawyer announced an appeal and said they would in turn seek 300 million in damages against the bankruptcy estate.

WHAT CECCHI GORI SAYS TODAY

More than twenty years later, Cecchi Gori has never changed his version.

The "Powers That Be" Theory

According to him, Fiorentina didn't fail because of his mistakes, but because "the powers that be united against the undersigned" to make him lose the team.

He explains: "Deep down, it would have been much simpler to take a football club away from me than to take away two David di Donatello awards in cinema. I was annoying because I was too good, too capable."

And again: "Sometimes, when you're too far ahead, you risk being misunderstood and attracting only jealousy and little credibility: this is Italy."

The Lack of Defense from Florence

Cecchi Gori also says: "Florence in 2002 didn't understand. They had it in for me and attacked me precisely over Fiorentina. The city didn't defend me. They attacked me over football and not over cinema because how do you attack someone who has won two Oscars?"

Irpef and Installments

He also claims he was unfairly targeted: "Teams had Irpef (income tax) on the money they gave players. By custom, the agreement was to pay it in installments over time. I was targeted: money immediately! And the magistrates declared Fiorentina bankrupt. Right after that, the 'debt relief' law was passed..."

In 2025, he stated: "Fiorentina was stolen from me. I watch them sometimes, but I don't get involved because this isn't my Fiorentina, and it's not even the Florentines' Fiorentina."

FIORENTINA TODAY

After the refoundation, Florentia Viola soon returned to being called Fiorentina and climbed back through the divisions. Today it's a stable Serie A team, with Italian ownership (the Commisso family) and a modern stadium in the works.

But the era of Batistuta, Rui Costa, and the European nights with the Cecchi Goris is just a memory. Here too, a sporting fairy tale paid for with money that, in the end, didn't exist.

Napoli

Let me tell you the story of Napoli, another dramatic chapter from those early 2000s. Here too, as with Fiorentina and Parma, it all ended in a bankruptcy that erased history. But the difference?

Napoli is the only one, among these, that has returned to the top and won a scudetto.

WHO WERE THE PROTAGONISTS? FERLAINO AND CORBELLI

Before the crash, Napoli belonged to Corrado Ferlaino, the engineer who had brought Maradona to Naples and lived through the golden years. In his later years, however, Ferlaino had partnered with Giorgio

Corbelli, a Roman entrepreneur who came from basketball (he had led Virtus Roma to a scudetto).

The company was divided 50-50 between the two. A coexistence that proved disastrous.

THE YEARS OF DECLINE (AFTER MARADONA)

After Maradona's departure in 1991, Napoli slowly began to sink.

The First Relegation (1997-98)

In the 1997-98 season came the first relegation to Serie B. It was a very hard blow for a city used to the top.

A symbolic image: in the Parma-Napoli match that year, Fabio Cannavaro (playing for Parma) consoled Taglialatela, the Neapolitan goalkeeper in tears over the mathematical relegation. A scene the fans have never forgotten.

The Return to Serie A and Economic Problems

Napoli immediately returned to Serie A in 1999-2000, thanks to Novellino and Schwoch's goals. But the economic problems were already very serious.

To raise cash, crazy deals were made.

THE SESA CASE: THE IMAGE OF DISASTER

In the summer of 2000, newly-promoted Napoli gave the bench to Zeman and chose as technical consultant Alessandro Moggi, son of the powerful Juventus director and head of Gea, a group that managed the agencies of dozens of players.

Through this consultancy, Napoli bought David Sesa, a Swiss striker from Lecce, for an insane sum: 18 billion lire.

Why was it absurd?

- Sesa was a good player, but not a champion.

- 18 billion for him was an exaggeration.

- Napoli was already up to its neck in debt.

- The money ended up partly with Moggi's Gea.

Sesa, interviewed years later, said: "They were difficult years, but I

have a beautiful memory of Naples." Too bad that for Neapolitan fans, that operation represented the image of a club making crazy purchases while its finances were sinking.

THE 2000-01 SEASON: THE PARMA-VERONA "FIX"

That same season (2000-01) ended with another wound.

The Suspicious Match

Verona that year never won away from home. Never. Funnily enough, on the last day of the season, they go to play at Parma (already safe with nothing to play for) and win 2-1, gaining three golden points for their survival.

Napoli, who had lost in Bologna, was relegated to Serie B.

What Did the Magistrates Discover?

Years later, it emerged that both Parma and Verona were controlled by Tanzi (Parmalat). Corbelli's (then co-owner of Napoli) theory was that the match was "pre-arranged" to harm no one and save an economic investment.

The magistrates agreed with Corbelli, but by then it was too late.

THE BANKRUPTCY (2004)

After that relegation, Napoli lived through years of agony between Serie B and increasingly serious economic problems.

August 2, 2004: Napoli Dies

The seventh section of the Court of Naples decreed the bankruptcy of the Società Sportiva Calcio Napoli.

The sentence was posted on the court notice board on August 3, 2004. After 78 years of history, the club no longer existed.

The court's words spoke of a "chronicle of a death foretold" and described the rescue attempts as "declamatory emphasis rather than concrete contributions."

Failed Rescue Attempts

- Luciano Gaucci (owner of Perugia) tried to buy the company, but the magistrates judged his attempts "late, scarcely transparent, and not

very respectful of the rules."

- De Luca (Siena) backed out at the last minute.

- No one came forward in time.

The Brand, the Trophies, the History

With the bankruptcy, the following disappeared:

- The light blue crest with the 'N'.

- The trophies won (including Maradona's two scudetti).

- The possibility of playing against the most prestigious clubs.

THE REBIRTH: DE LAURENTIIS ARRIVES

The Lodo Petrucci

The Lodo Petrucci was a law that allowed failed companies to restart from the lower division. Fiorentina and Napoli had made it.

But pay attention: in 2014, the Lodo was abolished. This is why, when Parma failed in 2015, they had to restart from Serie D.

The Birth of Napoli Soccer

At the end of summer 2004, Aurelio De Laurentiis, a Roman film producer, stepped forward.

On September 6, 2004, he founded Napoli Soccer, which would later return to being called Società Sportiva Calcio Napoli.

The Starting Conditions:

- Nothing: "There was nothing left, not even balls or shirts. I had to rebuild everything," De Laurentiis recounted.

- First signing: midfielder Montervino, who initially trained without balls and without official kits.

- Coach: Giampiero Ventura (later sacked, replaced by Edy Reja).

THE CLIMB BACK (2004-2007)

The First Two Years in Serie C

- First year (2004-05): Napoli failed promotion to B, losing in the

playoffs against Avellino.

- Second year (2005-06): dominated the championship and won promotion to Serie B.

The Serie B Season (2006-07)

That year was special. In Serie B, there were:

- Juventus after Calciopoli.

- Napoli aiming for immediate promotion.

On June 10, 2007, Napoli drew with Genoa, and both teams celebrated promotion to Serie A. The city started dreaming again.

Record numbers:

- 30,000 average spectators at the San Paolo.

- Peaks of 60,000 in matches against Juve and Genoa.

- Best defense in the league.

- 9 away wins (a record equaling 1949-50).

FROM SERIE C TO THE SCUDETTO: THE AZZURRA PHOENIX

What happened next is well-known history:

Coach	Achievements
Reja	First years in A, eighth place
Mazzarri	Third place and return to Champions, then second place
Benitez	Two Coppa Italias, one Supercup
Sarri	Second place with 91 points, beautiful football
Gattuso	Coppa Italia
Spalletti	SCUDETTO 2022-23 (third in history) and Champions quarter-finals

In 2004 they restarted from Serie C, in 2023 they won the championship, dominating with almost a 20-point lead over second

place.

THE 2004 CONTROVERSY: "JUSTICE IS DONE"

When Napoli failed in the summer of 2004, the newspaper La Padania (then the voice of the Northern League) headlined with satisfaction: "Justice is done, Napoli erased from football."

A headline Neapolitan fans have never forgotten. Today, years later, with that scudetto won and the Champions League achieved, many comment: "The Azure Phoenix has won again."

In the end, Napoli's story is perhaps the most beautiful among the crashes of the Seven Sisters. Because from those ashes, unlike others, something even greater was born. The only one that managed to win the scudetto again after dying and being resurrected.

Thanks to the Lodo Petrucci (the law allowing failed clubs to restart from a lower division), Fiorentina and Napoli had made it. But in 2014, the Lodo was abolished, and the new Parma had to restart from Serie D.

The Lesson Learned (Maybe)

In the end, little remains of that golden bubble. The Seven Sisters were financed by debt and fake capital gains. When the patron ran out of money, the whole shack collapsed.

That's why Italian football has changed today: we can no longer afford galactic stars. We have to buy young players, develop them, and sell them. It's survival.

4.

THE BOSMAN CASE

So, what are we talking about when we say "Bosman Case"?

Imagine being in 1995. A semi-unknown Belgian midfielder, a guy named Jean-Marc Bosman, says "enough." His contract with his club,

Liège, has expired, but they prevent him from moving to another team. It's as if they told you that you couldn't leave your job to go do a better one just around the corner. So he sues. And not in any old court – he goes straight to the European Court of Justice. And here comes the incredible part: he wins.

It wasn't just a victory for Bosman; it was a legal earthquake that completely redefined football. In practice, the Court gave players two superpowers:

1. Freedom of movement: When your contract expires, you're free. No more clubs holding your "registration" hostage like prison guards. You can leave for free. It was the end of the "registration-prison" system.

2. Goodbye to limits on foreigners: Before Bosman, leagues could severely restrict the number of foreign players on the field. After the ruling, any player from the European Union counted as a local player. The doors were thrown wide open.

In practice, one man's fight for his career became the blueprint for the modern transfer market.

How did it change the game for everyone?

For players, it was a huge victory. Suddenly, they had incredible contractual leverage. If you're a star and your contract is about to expire, you hold all the cards. Your club either pays you what you ask, or you leave for free and get a huge signing bonus from someone else. This gave rise to super-agents – the Mino Raiolas of this world – and sent salaries skyrocketing.

For clubs and the sport itself, it was a mix of good and bad.

- Global Squads: Remember when a team had a strong "local" identity? That started to fade. Squads became international, a mix of the best talents from all over Europe and beyond.

- The Economic Gap Explodes: This was the biggest consequence. Rich clubs could now snap up stars by offering crazy wages, while smaller clubs lived in constant terror of losing their stars for free. The gap between rich and poor became an abyss.

- Tactics Mix: With players from different footballing cultures on the same field, styles began to merge. English physicality met Spanish technique and Italian tactical genius. It made the game richer and more varied.

- The Rise of "Loan Armies": To cope with financial pressure, clubs got creative. Some, like Chelsea or Juventus, started buying tons of young talents, not to play them immediately, but to loan them out, let them develop, and sell them. It's a direct consequence of trying to circumvent the Bosman system.

The Italian Seesaw with Bosman:

From Kings to Survivors

And this brings us to Italy, where the Bosman ruling created a story of incredible highs and devastating lows.

The Triumph (90s)

In the immediate aftermath, Italy was the biggest winner. Serie A in the 90s was the place to be. It was the richest league in the world, a playground for the wealthiest presidents. With the limits on foreigners gone, it was a kind of unrestrained shopping spree. They could buy anyone. Edgar Davids? Come on over. Zinedine Zidane? Welcome to Turin. Ronaldo? The real one, the Phenomenon? His destination was Milan. It was the golden age of the "Seven Sisters" – seven teams all genuinely fighting for the scudetto. For a few glorious years, Italy was the center of the footballing universe.

The Collapse (2000s and beyond)

But after every party comes the hangover. The Premier League, with its incredible 1992 TV rights deal, began to build its financial fortress. And the very rules that had made Italy great started to strangle it.

1. The Financial Merry-Go-Round: To hold onto their new superstars, Italian clubs, often run as family hobbies rather than businesses, started paying unsustainable wages. Debts piled up. Clubs like Parma and Fiorentina, giants of the 90s, went bankrupt and had to be refounded in lower divisions. It was a financial house of cards.

2. From Final Destination to "Service Station": In the 90s, you came to Serie A to win and stay. After Bosman, your stars could simply... leave for free. We went from being the final destination to becoming a "transit league" – a league you pass through on your way to England or Spain. Think about it: Pirlo going from Inter to Milan for free? A bargain. Pogba leaving Juve for United for free? A huge financial hit. Donnarumma moving from Milan to PSG for free? It happened constantly, and it drained club coffers.

3. The Bottleneck for Young Italians: Without limits on EU players, it

was often easier and cheaper for a club to buy a ready-made 25-year-old from Eastern Europe than to invest years in developing a kid from their own youth system. This strangled the reservoir of young Italian talent, with disastrous consequences for the National team.So, the big summary is that the Bosman ruling gave Italy wings at the moment of its highest flight, but also exposed all its structural weaknesses – family-run management, old stadiums, an outdated business model. We won the initial battle, but lost the long-term economic war.

And so, where does Serie A stand today?

We no longer have the galactic superstars of the 90s. The global glamour has faded. So, what is the Italian league today?

Believe it or not, there's an extremely positive side. It's a story of intelligent adaptation.

- We've become the best talent-spotters in the world: Unable to compete with the wages of the English and Spanish for established stars, we've become incredibly good at finding rough diamonds. Think about it: Khvicha Kvaratskhelia was an unknown from Georgia, now he's a world phenomenon. Victor Osimhen from Nigeria? A superstar. Rafael Leão from Portugal? A phenomenon. This is our new superpower: buying raw, exciting talent, polishing it, and watching it shine.

- The league is super competitive: And you know what? It's made the league more fun. In the last six years, we've had five different champions! Napoli's scudetto victory was a modern fairy tale, a testament to smart construction, not just buying success. It's unpredictable and tactically fascinating.

In short, our model has completely flipped:

- 90s: You buy the expensive finished product.

- 20s: You buy the raw material, develop it, and sell it for a profit. It's more sustainable.

Maybe we've lost some of the old glamour, but maybe, just maybe, we've saved the soul of this sport.

And to protect our young players, what's being done?

We're certainly not sitting around hoping everything turns out fine. The system has rules to force clubs to take an interest in youth.

- "Homegrown" Quotas: In the Serie A squad list, you must have a certain number of players trained at the club and a certain number trained in Italy. If you don't meet the quota, on matchday you literally have fewer players available to call up. It's a powerful incentive to invest in the youth sector.

- Mandatory Investment: Clubs are required to have a competitive youth sector (Primavera teams) simply to get a license to play in Serie A.

- Smart Tax Incentives: The famous "Decreto Crescita" (Growth Decree), which was used to bring lots of over-30 players to Italy, has been reformed. Now clubs can only use it for one player per season. This forces them to be strategic, maybe using it to bring an Italian talent home from abroad instead of taking yet another foreigner.

- The "Profit" Model: Clubs like Atalanta and Sassuolo have built their entire business on buying young players, developing them, and selling them for large capital gains. This creates a natural market for young footballers, Italian or not.

It's not a perfect system, but it's an intelligent adaptation to a ruthless global market. It ensures that young talent has a pathway and a value.

Wait, but all our best coaches are leaving! Is that bad?

Carlo Ancelotti, Antonio Conte, Roberto De Zerbi, Maurizio Sarri... they're all coaching abroad. Is it a brain drain?

Absolutely not! It's definitive proof that we're the best in the world at producing coaches! It's a victory lap, not a loss.

- Ancelotti is the undisputed king of Europe, winning Champions Leagues wherever he goes.

- Conte revolutionized English football with his tactics at Chelsea.

- De Zerbi had Guardiola studying his methods at Brighton.

Our secret weapon? Coverciano. It's not about teaching a style like "catenaccio." It's about teaching a method of thinking: analysis, adaptation, meticulous preparation. We're exporting this method all over the world.

Serie A remains the most intense tactical laboratory in the world. The pressure to win with limited budgets forces coaches to constantly innovate. It's a forge that produces new geniuses like Thiago Motta or

Vincenzo Italiano.

So, the "exodus" of coaches is actually a conquest. The real challenge isn't losing them, but creating the conditions so that they, and our best players, might one day want to stay.

Speaking of the National team... What happened after 2006?

This is the great Italian paradox. For years, our clubs held their own in Europe, but the National team... oof. Not qualifying for the World Cup in 2018 and then again in 2022? It's a national trauma. A deep wound.

So, what went wrong? It was the perfect storm of negative things.

The Deep Roots of the Problem:

- The youth factory stopped: We've already talked about it. After Bosman, clubs filled up with foreigners. In the 90s, Serie A was 70% Italian. In the 2010s, it often dropped below 35%. Young Italians simply didn't play.

- An outdated system: For years, our youth sector focused on physicality and winning at all costs, killing creativity and technique. While Spain, Germany, and Belgium were revolutionizing their academies, we were stuck in the past.

- Poor infrastructure: We were light years behind Northern Europe in terms of training centers and facilities for young players.

- The "transit league" effect: As soon as a young Italian showed something (like Verratti or Zaniolo), he was often sold abroad, without making those fundamental 200-plus Serie A appearances to mature.

- The black hole between generations: After the legends of 2006 – Buffon, Cannavaro, Pirlo, Totti, Del Piero – came the desert. No new leaders, no iconic number 10s, a series of good but not phenomenal strikers. The talent pool had dried up.

- The world changed (and we didn't): Football became faster, more athletic, pressing-based. We clung to our old identity and fell behind. Smaller nations like Belgium and Croatia invested smartly and overtook us.

And then, a glimmer of hope:

Then Roberto Mancini arrived in 2021. His victory at the European Championship showed the way out. He succeeded by giving young

players (Chiesa, Barella, Locatelli) confidence before they were superstars. He built a team with a clear identity, playing positive, offensive football. It was a model born from the desperation of 2018.

Slowly, things are changing. The "homegrown" rules are starting to bear fruit. Look at the 2003-2004 generation – guys like Wilfried Gnonto, Giorgio Scalvini, Cesare Casadei. There's genuine hope again.

In football, you can't live forever on memories. Either you invest in the future, or the future humiliates you. Italy learned this lesson at a very high price.

The Final Whistle

The Bosman ruling was a hurricane. It swept away the football of the past. Italy rode that wave first, celebrating as if there was no tomorrow. But then we realized our house was built on sand, while England and others had built bunkers.

Today we are not the richest, the most glamorous, or the final destination for the world's best players. But we have become something else: the smartest, most tactical league, the best talent-hunters in the world. We survive and compete through pure ingenuity.

It's a different football now. Perhaps less dazzling, but absolutely full of passion, incredible stories, and a stubborn, fighting hope. And for a true fan, in the end, maybe that's what matters most.

So there you have it, Bosman, that Belgian footballer phenomenon — yes, the very one who, if he hadn't made that ruling, no one would remember if he could even stand on a pitch — with the spectacle Serie A offers today, he'd probably look like a champion himself.

So, a toast to Serie A. Always teetering between disaster and the purest genius. Forza Italia!

5.

THE RISE OF THE PREMIER LEAGUE:

the English got organized with new stadiums, marketing, TV rights. We fell behind. So, make yourself comfortable, because this is the mother of all questions for anyone who loves Italian football. The question isn't just "how much" the Premier League has overtaken us, but "why." The overtaking didn't happen by chance, but through a series of precise choices, made (or not made) starting in the 80s and 90s. Basically, it's as if we all started together at a traffic light: the Premier League took the highway in a Ferrari, while we got stuck on the ring road in a Fiat 500.

Let's see point by point how we arrived at this gap.

THE TV RIGHTS GAME-CHANGER: THE ENGLISH MASTERSTROKE

It all starts in the early 90s. The newly formed Premier League (born in 1992) had an intuition that we would now call "brilliant": transforming football into a global show.

What they did:

- They signed a revolutionary agreement with Sky Sports, creating pay-per-view football as a premium product.

- They understood that football wasn't just the 90 minutes on the pitch, but also how it was "packaged" and sold to the public.

Today the numbers speak clearly:

- The Premier League sells TV rights in over 200 territories worldwide, from the United States to Asia, from Africa to Latin America.

- For the 2025-2028 cycle, it's predicted that the Premier League will earn over 13 billion pounds from TV rights alone.

- The Spanish Liga, second in this ranking, earns less than half.

The most painful statistic: the Premier League earns more from international rights than from domestic ones. It means their product is so appealing that the whole world pays to watch it.

AND IN ITALY? THE MELANDRI LAW AND THE DELAY

Here at home, the situation is completely different. Since 2008, the Melandri Law has been in effect, a regulation that prohibits granting TV rights to a single broadcaster.

The paradoxical effect: born with the intention of maximizing revenue, it ended up "unbundling" the rights among multiple operators, with disappointing results.

Serie A's numbers:

- Domestic revenue stagnant at around 900 million euros annually for 15 years.

- International revenue: around 240 million euros (growing, but miles away from the English numbers).

- Total for the 2024-2029 cycle: 1.14 billion euros.

The merciless comparison:

For every euro that comes into Serie A, almost four enter the Premier League.

League	Annual TV Rights Income
Premier League	3.4 billion pounds
Serie A	900 million euros

The situation is so absurd that Liverpool alone earns from TV rights roughly as much as Inter, Napoli, and Milan combined.

And the biggest paradox? Southampton, last in the Premier League table, took home 130 million euros, almost double what Inter, who were first in Serie A, got with 81.9 million.

THE STADIUMS: OUR HOME VS. THE COUNCIL HOUSE

This is perhaps the biggest and most difficult difference to bridge.

The Choice of the 80s-90s

According to Luciano Mondellini, director of Calcio e Finanza, the gap was created in that historical period. While England allocated TV rights revenue to building owned stadiums and renovating facilities, Italy in the same period invested it in buying new players.

The result:

- In England: modern, club-owned stadiums that generate revenue 365 days a year.

- In Italy: 90% of stadiums are owned by the Municipalities. Old structures, often with running tracks, that become profitable only about 20 times a year.

What does it mean to own the stadium?

English clubs don't just sell tickets, but also:

- Restaurants and hospitality

- Shops and merchandise

- Concerts and events (Tottenham, for example, also hosts NFL events)

- Naming rights (selling the stadium's name to a sponsor)

The numbers:

- Premier League matchday revenues exceed 700 million pounds annually.

- Tottenham alone, with its new stadium, generates over 100 million a year just from matchday and hospitality.

The San Siro Case (Perfect Example of the Italian Problem)

The president of Lega Serie A, Ezio Simonelli, said in September 2025 without mincing words that San Siro is "now inadequate."

Why is it inadequate?

- Rejected by UEFA to host the 2027 Champions League final.

- Old stands, subpar TV studios.

- Hospitality area cannot be integrated.

- Problems even going to the bathroom ("luckily our fans aren't big

beer drinkers," Simonelli joked).

And Italian bureaucracy doesn't help: they've been talking about a stadium commissioner to streamline procedures for years, but as of September 2025 there was still no sign of one.

The result? While England and Germany have built three times as many stadiums as us in the last 15 years, Italy is stuck at just 6 new or renovated facilities.

3. GLOBAL MARKETING: A BRAND, A PRODUCT

The Premier League understood that football is entertainment. It's not just sport, it's a product to be sold worldwide.

The English Marketing Machine

- Sponsorships: every aspect of the game is monetized. Sponsors on shirts, on sleeves, naming rights, official partnerships.

- Global Clubs: Manchester United, Liverpool, Manchester City have deals worth hundreds of millions with Adidas, Nike, Puma.

- Competitiveness: the league is sold as unpredictable. Even a newly promoted team can beat the league leaders. This keeps viewers glued.

The Crazy Social Media Stat

To understand the difference in "global penetration," look at Liverpool:

- In the 2024-25 season, they recorded 1.7 billion social media interactions.

- A 10% increase over the previous season.

- The day they won the title: 60.7 million interactions in 24 hours.

- 11 million YouTube subscribers (first Premier League club to reach the Diamond Play Button).

- 504 million cumulative global TV viewers.

And pay attention: the Premier League isn't just the top clubs. Even mid-table teams have global followings, because the Premier League brand sells itself.

The Resource Distribution Model

Another secret of English success: TV rights money is distributed more

equitably than in Italy.

- In the Premier League, even small clubs get enough to compete and buy good players.

- In Serie A, distribution is historically skewed in favor of the big clubs, creating an internal gap that weakens the entire league.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM HOOLIGANS TO FAMILIES

This is a part of the story few people know. In the 80s, English football was plagued by the hooligan problem.

The Tragedies:

- Heysel (1985): 39 dead, a 5-year ban for English teams from European competitions.

- Hillsborough (1989): 97 dead, an immense tragedy that changed everything.

After these tragedies, the government led by Margaret Thatcher imposed very harsh measures:

- Stadiums transformed into safe places, with all seats.

- Massive investments in security.

- Ban on barriers and fences.

The result: English stadiums became welcoming places for families, where you can go safely. Children can cheer without fear, women can go to the stadium serenely.

In Italy? The situation remained as it always was:

- Dilapidated and uncomfortable stadiums.

- Public order problems.

- Difficulty with access and parking.

- Organized fan groups that often discourage families.

This created a vicious circle: fewer people at the stadium, less revenue, less desire to invest in facilities.

FOREIGN INVESTORS

All these differences led to a natural consequence: those with money invest where the system works.

In England:

- Modernization, wealth, and owned stadiums attracted investors from all over the world.

- Especially Russians and Arabs, who brought enormous capital (Chelsea with Abramovich, Manchester City with the Emiratis, Newcastle with the Saudis).

- These investments allowed clubs to buy the best players and build increasingly stronger teams.

In Italy:

- Foreign investors arrived later and with less capital.

- They had to contend with dilapidated stadiums, bureaucracy, pre-existing debts.

- Today, half of Serie A clubs are in foreign hands, but their values are still half compared to the Premier League, and sponsors pay much less.

THE FINAL PARADOX

And here's the interesting part. Despite the Premier League being a colossus, half of English clubs have less than a month's wages in cash reserves. Only one in twenty (Brighton!) meets all the financial sustainability criteria of the new regulator.

Basically, they turn over billions and live hand-to-mouth.

Serie A, poor but beautiful (or at least clever), has learned to survive through ingenuity:

- We buy unknown youngsters.

- We develop them.

- We sell them at a high price.

Kvaratskhelia, Osimhen, Leão... came from nowhere, became stars.

It's our superpower.

IN CONCLUSION: WHAT IS NEEDED TO CATCH UP?

According to experts, the gap can only be closed with:

1. Structural investments (new stadiums).

2. More efficient transfer market sessions.

3. More transparent regulations.

4. Reform of TV rights sales (abolish the Melandri Law and move to exclusive sale).

The Italian Parliament has presented a bill to overcome the Melandri Law and allow the exclusive sale of TV rights to a single operator, with licenses up to three years. The goal is for the new regulations to come into force from July 1, 2026.

But the road is uphill. And time is running out.

In a nutshell: the Premier League is a Formula 1 Ferrari, incredibly fast but with brakes that are a bit shaky. Serie A is a lovingly restored Fiat 500, which might overtake you on a hill but just doesn't have the highway to race on. And that, in the end, is the difference.

Spurs stadium

6.

CALCIOPOLI:

the scandal destroyed international credibility.

So, make yourself comfortable, because this is a long, complicated story, and even now, almost twenty years later, it can still make whole tables of friends argue. We're talking about Calciopoli, the scandal that in 2006 shook the foundations of Italian football and, as you said, destroyed its international credibility. It was practically our "Irpinia earthquake" of football: it changed the landscape forever.

The Summer That Changed Everything: What Happened?

Imagine the scene: it's the spring of 2006. Lippi's national team is about to leave for the World Cup in Germany, and in Italy, you can feel that tense end-of-championship atmosphere. At the beginning of May, however, incredible phone taps start appearing in the newspapers, recorded between 2004 and 2005. Stuff that would make "Big Brother" seem like a joke.

What emerged from these phone calls? A power system, a dense network of relationships between club directors, referee assignors, and federal leaders, with the aim of influencing referee appointments. It wasn't about "buying" matches in the classic sense, but about choosing "friendly" referees for important matches, those more susceptible to pressure. The alleged mastermind of all this was the most powerful man in Italian football, the then general director of Juventus, Luciano Moggi.

The Judicial Earthquake: Sanctions and Chaos

From there, it was a devastating domino effect. In a few weeks, while Italy was winning the World Cup, sports justice ran its course, and the sentences were very harsh:

- Juventus: the queen of Italian football, the most loved and hated team, was condemned to relegation to Serie B for the first time in its history. Two scudetti were revoked from them (those of 2004-05 and 2005-06), and they started with a heavy points penalty.

- Milan, Fiorentina, and Lazio: heavy points penalties and point deductions for the following season. Milan, for example, started with -8 in the league.

- Directors and referees: suspensions and bans rained down on all the main accused, from Moggi to Giraudo (Juventus), from the Della Valle brothers (Fiorentina) to Claudio Lotito (Lazio), as well as assignors and referees like Massimo De Santis.

And the 2005-06 scudetto? That year's championship ended with Juventus first and Milan second. With the sentences, the standings were rewritten, and the title was awarded "on paper" to Inter, who had finished third.

Why Did It Destroy International Credibility?

Now we come to the crucial point of your question. Why did all this make Serie A look like a banana republic in the eyes of the world?

1. The Image of a Rotten System

Before 2006, abroad they looked at us with a mix of respect and awe. Serie A was the most tactical and difficult league in the world, the one where all the champions went to play. After Calciopoli, the image projected was of a league where championships were won also (or above all) in the corridors of prosecutors' offices and the offices of referee assignors, not just on the pitch. The watchword abroad became: "Italian football is a beautiful theater, but the script is written by others."

2. The Humiliation of "Rewriting" Championships

Think about it: for the first time in the history of European football, two scudetti won on the pitch were canceled by a court ruling. For a foreign fan, it was incomprehensible. It meant that the standings were no longer a fact, but a working hypothesis. This cast a shadow of suspicion over everything that had been done in previous years.

3. The Departure of Champions and the Flight of Investment

That ruling had an immediate boomerang effect. Juventus, relegated to Serie B, lost its champions: Cannavaro, Thuram, Zambrotta, Vieira, Ibrahimović left en masse. But not just them. The "Serie A" brand came out so weakened that many top players thought: "But should I go play in a league where everything is fake?".

- Players: they began to prefer the Premier League, richer and, at the time, perceived as "cleaner."

- Sponsors and TV rights: the lost credibility translated into lower revenues. Why would a global company associate its brand with a league with this reputation?

4. The Feeling of "Selective" Justice

This is the point that still fuels discussions among fans today. During the criminal trials in Naples, wiretaps emerged that also involved Inter directors (then chaired by Giacinto Facchetti) in conversations with the same assignors. But when the Federal Prosecutor's Office, in 2011, tried to investigate these new elements, time had run out: the crimes fell under the statute of limitations.

This generated a perception (especially among Juventus fans, but not only) of a "rigged justice system": a lightning-fast and implacable justice in 2006 to punish some, and a slow justice that ended up prescribing everything when elements about others emerged. Juve filed countless appeals, even for damages, but the last one was definitively rejected by the Council of State in 2024, confirming the 2006 scudetto to Inter.

Luciano Moggi

The Final Paradox: An Open Wound

What makes Calciopoli a unique case is that, unlike other scandals, there has never been a shared truth. Sports justice handed down its sentences, criminal justice ran aground with the statute of limitations, and the public debate remained in a limbo of "guilty by law" and "prescribed for subsequent facts."

The legacy has been heavy:

- The end of the Seven Sisters: It accelerated the collapse of our football system, making us economically weaker.

- Loss of appeal: Serie A was no longer perceived as the ultimate league.

- The rift between fan bases: The controversies over who was "truly" guilty created a very deep divide, particularly between Juventus and Inter fans, which still lasts today.

In summary, Calciopoli destroyed Serie A's international credibility because it showed the world a sick system, punished its protagonists very harshly, and left behind a trail of doubts and controversies that made our football seem more like a medieval fiefdom than a modern league.

It's not a new scandal, but a bomb that exploded on TV the other day, in February 2026, reopening old wounds that seemed to have healed. They're talking about Calciopoli again, but in a way you might not expect.

Basically, imagine being at the bar with friends and starting to argue about an incident that happened on Sunday in the Inter-Juventus match. One says one thing, another says something else, and at some point, Moggi's name comes up, then Facchetti's, and the discussion degenerates to the point where someone storms off, slamming the door. Well, that little scene actually happened, on television, live nationally. And it was an incredible spectacle.

The Spark: An Incident on the Pitch

It all starts from the league match Inter-Juventus, which ended 3-2 for Inter. During the match, there was an incident that caused a huge debate: Inter's defender, Alessandro Bastoni, according to many (and the images seem to agree) dives in the box, and the referee La Penna gives a second yellow card and sends off Juventus player Pierre Kalulu.

An episode that alone would be enough to fill the Sunday evening analysis shows.

The Bomb on TV: Giletti vs. Everyone

The next evening, Monday, February 16, 2026, on "Il Processo al 90°" on Rai2, it's packed. They're discussing this incident. Massimo Giletti, a famous journalist and also a declared Juventus fan, joins via link.

In the studio is Gian Luca Rossi, a journalist of Inter faith. The discussion starts tense immediately.

Giletti attacks Bastoni harshly, saying it's scandalous that a national team player simulates like that and makes fun of the opponent. So far, a normal discussion.

Then, however, Giletti says a phrase that changes everything. He says:

"I wouldn't want to find ourselves like in Calciopoli with FIGC presidents calling the referees. We've already been through that."

At this point, the verbal brawl starts.

The Phrase That Blew Everything Up

Rossi, the Inter pundit, tries to defend himself and downplay it. But Giletti won't have it and brings out the heavy artillery. Live on national TV, he shouts this phrase that went viral in a few hours: "Inter's scudetto, everyone knows it, is a scudetto marked 'statute of limitations'! The crimes and the phone calls made by the Inter system were worse than those Moggi made."

Giletti is referring to the fact that, in the Calciopoli investigations, wiretaps also emerged involving Inter directors (at the time with Giacinto Facchetti as president), but those crimes fell under the statute of limitations. According to him, therefore, Inter wasn't punished for a technicality, not because it was innocent.

He also adds:

"Go and read Palazzi's files!"

Palazzi was the Federal Prosecutor who, at a later time (2011), tried to reopen the case, but the deadlines had passed.

The Walk-Off: "I don't talk to certain people"

At this point, Giletti completely loses patience. He says the Inter fans in the studio are "acting in bad faith" because they keep telling the story of Moggi locking referee Paparesta in the dressing room (which would be true), but they "forget" to talk about the wiretaps involving Inter.

And he leaves. He walks out of the studio live on national TV, leaving the hosts (Marco Mazzocchi and Paola Ferrari) and the guests stunned. Mazzocchi tries to joke: "What a theatrical twist, go get

Massimo back!" But nothing, Giletti was already out.

The episode had a ratings boom: almost 500,000 viewers with an 8.7% share, very high numbers for a show like that.

And Luciano Moggi? He's There, and He Raises the Stakes

As if that weren't enough, the next day (February 17), Luciano Moggi, the former general director of Juventus considered the mastermind of Calciopoli, goes on the radio and responds to what's being said.

A few days earlier, former Inter president Massimo Moratti had given an interview. Moggi, on Radio Radio, responds sharply:

"Calciopoli? Moratti and the Inter fans only remember what they want: prescribed! Sometimes it's better to keep quiet... The sentences speak clearly."

In short, he's saying the same thing as Giletti: the statute of limitations saved Inter, and no one talks about it.

Paparesta: "Moggi? Child's play compared to today"

There's another twist in this story. The former referee Gianluca Paparesta – yes, the very one who according to legend was "locked in the dressing room" by Moggi in Reggio Calabria – gives an interview in which he says something surprising.

Speaking about the Inter-Juve incident, where there were furious protests from Juventus directors (Chiellini and Comolli) at halftime, Paparesta says:

"What Moggi did back then is a tenth of what Comolli did on Saturday. The protest they made was coming to the dressing room to say: 'Shame on you, you penalized us.' This guy, on the other hand, was jumping on him, shouting, almost wanting to eat him."

And he adds a crazy detail: according to him, the story of Moggi locking him in the dressing room isn't true. He says Moggi, to "show off" to a woman on the phone, invented that story, and it has remained as a truth in the collective imagination. Basically, Paparesta is saying that today's violent behavior is worse than that of Calciopoli.

What does all this mean?

That twenty years later, Calciopoli is still an open wound. That there is no shared truth. That just one on-field incident is enough to bring back

old grudges and accusations that were never really laid to rest.

The "official" version says Juve was wrong and was punished. The version of many Juventus fans (and today also of Giletti) says that "everyone was doing the same things, but only Juve was punished, while the others got the statute of limitations."

And the saddest thing? That even today, in 2026, we're still talking about it. And people are walking off studio sets live on national TV.

The next time someone says football is just a sport, show them the video of this.

Why did it destroy international credibility?

1. The image of a rotten system: Before 2006, abroad they looked at us with respect. After Calciopoli, the image was of a league where you won in the corridors, not on the pitch.

2. The humiliation of rewriting championships: Two scudetti won on the pitch were canceled. For a foreigner, it was incomprehensible.

3. The departure of champions: Juventus lost Cannavaro, Thuram, Zambrotta, Vieira, Ibrahimović. Top players thought: "But should I go play in a league where everything is fake?"

4. The feeling of "selective" justice: Wiretaps emerged involving Inter directors too. But when they tried to investigate (2011), the crimes fell under the statute of limitations. This generated the perception of a "rigged justice system."

An open wound.

Today, that polytheism of power no longer exists. The Seven Sisters were an economic and sporting miracle that will probably never return.

It was the most beautiful football in the world, period.

The Context

Those presidents of the 90s weren't simple entrepreneurs; they were patrons. Men who used their companies to finance the fans' dreams. The problem? When the dream becomes too big and the company starts to wobble, the house of cards collapses.

Silvio Berlusconi

7.

This brings us to the need to integrate and connect three points: the disappearance of the fantasista, the dictatorship of tactics, and the youth desert. They aren't three separate problems, but one big, vicious circle that has been suffocating Italian football for years. It's a kind of perfect storm, and the interesting (or sad) part is seeing how each piece fuels the other.

Let's try to put all the pieces together.

The Paradox of Italian Football: Very Strong Young Players, National Team in Crisis

The starting point is the one you raised, and it's the most frustrating

paradox: our Under-17 and Under-21 teams go around Europe competing on equal terms with everyone, showing that raw talent exists, and how. Players like Zaniolo, Tonali, and company shine in youth tournaments. And then? Then they return to their clubs and sit on the bench. It's like seeing the trailer for a fantastic movie that, however, the system then refuses to release in theaters.

The point is that talent isn't lacking; the problem is that the professional system, Serie A, is structurally incapable of nurturing it. These young players hit what we can call an Under-21 "glass ceiling."

The Numbers Don't Lie: A Glass Ceiling for U-21s

The data is merciless and captures an unequivocal reality: in Serie A, young players don't get to play. Full stop.

Bottom of the league in Europe: According to the CIES Football Observatory, in 2025, Under-21 players trained in Italy accounted for just 1.9% of the total minutes played in the league. It's not just a low figure; it's the lowest among all major European championships. To give context:

- In France (Ligue 1) they are at 7.8%.

- In Spain (La Liga) at 4.0%.

- In Germany (Bundesliga) at 3.4%.

- Even in the English Premier League, the one with easy money, they are at 2.4%.

A Bulgarian percentage [Note: This likely refers to the Bulgarian league's low standing/percentage, meaning "rock bottom"]: We're down there, practically level with the UAE league. It means an Italian kid, even a very strong one, has a better chance of playing regularly in France, Spain, or Germany than in his own country. And the data on "transition" is equally impressive: serious academic studies say that less than 20% of players called up to youth national teams (from Under-16 to Under-21) ever make their debut for the senior team. An incredible funnel.

The Faults of Club Culture: Short-Term Results and Mediocre Foreigners

But why does this happen? It's not by chance; it's a cultural issue rooted in the way Italian clubs think.

- The "win at all costs" mentality: Those who have worked in youth sectors, like Cristian Brocchi, are very harsh. He says the system is wrong to reward coaches and directors only for results. This leads to fielding the most physically imposing sixteen-year-olds to win the youth category championship, instead of letting purer but perhaps slighter talents play and make mistakes. The goal should be to produce players for the first team, not to win the Primavera trophy. But instead, immediate results are rewarded.

- Economic convenience: As the CEO of Lega Serie A, Luigi De Siervo, said, today it's "more convenient to buy a talented player than to train one." And this speaks volumes about the mentality. Clubs, under pressure to get results immediately, prefer to take the foreigner who is (hopefully) already ready, even if mediocre, rather than wait and develop an Italian kid. Claudio Marchisio, a symbol, raised the alarm: he recounted seeing teams win the Primavera scudetto without a single Italian on the pitch. Crazy stuff.

- A rigid path with no shortcuts: Cesc Fàbregas, who now coaches Como and knows both Spain and Italy well, noted a huge cultural difference. He recounted that when he wanted to have two sixteen-year-olds train with his Primavera team, in Italy it "caused a bit of discussion," as if it were something that "disrupts the pathway." In Spain, on the other hand, there's a "real obsession" with debuting young players. Here, the path is seen as a ladder, to be climbed one rung at a time without rushing; in Spain, it's a highway where talent can overtake.

The Dictatorship of "Negative" Tactics

And here we get to the heart of the third point, that of tactics. Because this lack of courage in playing young players is the same thing that killed the fantasista. It's the same culture that privileges "not losing" over "winning."

- The obsession with control: Just think of certain coaches, like Allegri or Conte, who have often been celebrated for their ability to "manage" and "bring home the result." A philosophy, as has also been written abroad, of "passivity" and "systematic destruction of rhythm." You build not to concede, not to create. And in this scenario, the pure number 10, the fantasista who needs freedom of action, who isn't necessarily expected to always track back, is the first to be sacrificed.

- A poor spectacle: If you take away improvisation, the flash of genius,

what's left? What's left is a predictable, slow match, broken up by fouls and time-wasting. It's no coincidence that people like Antonio Cassano say watching Serie A has become "a pain," with no rhythm or spectacle. And the numbers back him up: the average goals per game this season is the lowest in 40 years.

- Tactical instability: Then, paradoxically, this obsession with tactics doesn't even lead to clear game models. Coaches, fearing the sack, constantly change formations, confusing the players, as happened with Pioli at Fiorentina. Or, when a coach with a strong identity like Gasperini leaves, the one who arrives after struggles to impose a new system and gets sacked after a few months.

The Circle Closes

So, there you have it, the circle closes perfectly.

1. The culture of results and the fear of being sacked lead coaches to prefer cautious tactics and "safe" players.

2. This closes the door on the fantasista, who is seen as a luxury they can't afford.

3. It also closes the door on young players, considered too "immature" or "unpredictable" to be thrown into the fray. Much better a reliable veteran or a ready-made foreign player.

4. The result is a slower, less creative league, with fewer goals and an ever-weakening bond with the territory and its own fans, who don't get to see new local heroes grow.

5. And the senior National team, consequently, finds itself with quality raw material, but which has been prevented from slow-cooking, and arrives at the senior level less competitive than its youth system would lead you to hope.

The Evolution of Tactical Thought: From "Not Conceding" to "Not Daring"

The Origins: The Burden of "Catenaccio"

To understand where we are today, we have to start from afar. The Italian school of football was for decades the most admired and feared precisely for its tactical superiority, embodied by "catenaccio." This

system, born in the 60s, privileged the defensive phase, control of space, and counter-attacks. It brought triumphs, but it also planted a seed that, over time, would become a suffocating tree: the idea that the priority aspect of football was not conceding goals.

In the 90s and 2000s, this tradition evolved but didn't change drastically. Serie A was the league where tactics were studied like nowhere else, where coaches were "professors." But while Spain and Germany were beginning to develop a more aggressive style, based on possession and verticality, Italy remained anchored to a culture that rewarded positional cunning and result management.

Modern Exasperation: Tactics as a Cage

In the last 10-15 years, this trend has become exaggerated. Coaches like Massimiliano Allegri and Antonio Conte, albeit with different philosophies, have represented two sides of the same coin: a football culture where error is the worst of evils. Conte with his intensity and search for solidity, Allegri with his "managing" and "result first."

The problem is that this mentality has spread like wildfire, becoming the dominant culture. Here's how it manifests:

- Fear of risk: In a league where a coach can be sacked after a few matches, the priority becomes "safety." And who is "safer" than an experienced veteran who knows all the tricks of the trade? An eighteen-year-old, no matter how talented, is by definition an unknown quantity. He can make mistakes, have a dip, not handle the pressure. Better not to risk it. The 'luxury' of a player who needs creative freedom is often questioned. Players like Antonio Cassano and Mario Balotelli are described as brilliant fantasisti, but their 'unpredictable abilities' come with a reputation for being 'hopelessly undisciplined' and difficult to manage. Today it takes 'courage' for a coach to field two players of this type together, as they must be carefully integrated into a system that requires defensive work from everyone. Modern football sometimes forces these artists to adapt or be left behind.

- The tactical "cage": Former CT Cesare Prandelli used a perfect term: "giocosità" [playfulness], meaning the excess of tactics and rigidity of patterns that suffocates the imagination of young players. Kids are raised in youth sectors where you win at all costs, where physicality and task execution are privileged, not creativity. The result? They arrive in the first team already "programmed," without having developed that dribbling ability or that unpredictable play that made the

difference.

- The illusion of competence: Paradoxically, the hyper-tactical competence of Italian coaches becomes a boomerang. A young Spaniard or German is often inserted into a more fluid game context, where he can express himself. A young Italian is inserted into a rigid system where he has to learn dozens of movements before even touching the ball. Tactics, from a tool for growth, become a cage.

The Consequences: Why Young Players Don't Find Space

This tactical evolution has created a series of structural consequences that explain the dramatic data we've seen (1.9% of playing time for Italian U-21s, the worst in Europe).

The Paradox of Youth Sectors

Our youth sectors work, and how. The Under-17 and Under-21 national teams are competitive. The problem is that the goal of Italian youth academies is not to produce players for the first team, but to win their category championships. As Cristian Brocchi said earlier, he was very clear: the system rewards those who win the Primavera trophy, not those who debut three kids in Serie A. This leads to fielding the most physically imposing sixteen-year-olds, the ones who guarantee an immediate result, but who perhaps have less pure talent. The real talents, perhaps slighter but more technical, stay on the bench or are sacrificed.

The Convenience of the Foreigner

In a context of pressure for results and need for experience, Italian clubs have found a shortcut: the foreigner. With over 68% of foreign players in the squads and with teams like Milan and Inter scoring the vast majority of their goals with non-Italian players, the path is clear.

The CEO of Lega Serie A admitted it without mincing words: "Today it's more convenient to buy a talented player than to train him." This is the endpoint of a cultural evolution: training is no longer a value, but a cost. And in a short-term perspective, the "finished product" (often mediocre) from abroad is preferred over investing time and resources in an Italian kid.

The Under-21 "Glass Ceiling"

Thus is created the famous "glass ceiling." An Italian kid, even of great talent, even a protagonist with the Under-21 National team, returns to his club and finds himself facing a wall. To gain experience he should play, but to play he must already be experienced. It's a vicious circle that leads him either to rot on the bench or to have to go abroad to seek playing time, as is happening to many promising youngsters.

And then there's the extraordinary example of Cristian Chivu at Inter. After winning the Primavera, he was promoted to the first team and immediately showed a textbook management of young players. His words are the perfect synthesis of the necessary change in mentality:

"Those who are truly good and have quality, it's right that they play. We mustn't let ourselves be conditioned by age, because if we stand around waiting, the years go by and then 'they're still not ready.' You have to throw them in, you have to try them. If they have personality, character, spirit of sacrifice, and a work ethic, with the help of stronger teammates, everything becomes easier. You have to believe in it and give them trust."

Chivu launched players like Pio Esposito and Giovanni Bonfanti, demonstrating that when a coach believes and dares, the youngsters respond.

The Example of Milan and Other Clubs

Milan is also investing heavily in young players, with Francesco Camarda becoming the youngest debutant and scorer in Rossoneri history. The club is trying to rebuild a philosophy that unites tradition and innovation, valuing the youth sector. Small signs that, if multiplied, could reverse the trend. Eh, but then panic set in! They paraded Camarda and now there are fewer and fewer Italians on the pitch, with a nice little group of second-choice foreign ball boys. So yes, maybe Milan as an example leaves a little to be desired. (20/02/26)

The Synthesis: A Possible Reversal of Course

The evolution of tactical thinking in Serie A has led to a lack of young players because it has created a culture of "not taking risks" and "immediate results" that considers young players a luxury they cannot afford.

On one hand, the tradition of catenaccio and defensive superiority has

left a legacy of an obsession with control that suffocates creativity. On the other, the pressure for results has pushed clubs to prefer the "safe" foreigner over the "uncertain" youngster.

The path, however, is not irreversible. The turning point began with courageous coaches like Gasperini and De Zerbi, who demonstrated that you can play offensive and winning football even in Italy. Today, a new generation of coaches is picking up that baton, and clubs like Inter and Milan are starting to give trust to young players.

So, we've hit the nail on the head: how the hell did we end up in this mess? What was the path of the tactical evolution that led to the shortage of young players in Serie A?

The answer is a fascinating (and slightly depressing) journey that starts from the cult of tactics and goes straight to the fear of daring. In practice, we've exaggerated so much with schemes and strategies that in the end, we've made tactics the number one enemy of pure talent. A completely Italian paradox.

How we got to this point: from "not conceding" to "not even trying"

The Roots: That "Catenaccio" Burden

To understand the present, we need to jump back. The Italian school was for decades the most studied and feared in the world precisely for its tactical superiority, with catenaccio as its symbol. This system, born in the 60s, reasoned like this: first, don't concede goals, then control the spaces, and finally counter-attack. It brought home a lot of trophies, ok. But it also planted a seed that over time became a rather suffocating tree: the idea that the absolute priority was not to concede goals.

In the 90s and 2000s, this thing evolved but didn't change much. Serie A was the league where you studied tactics as if you were at university, the coaches were "professors." Too bad that while Spain and Germany were starting to develop a more aggressive style, based on possession and verticality, we remained glued to a culture that rewarded positional cunning and result management. A bit like driving with the handbrake on.

The Exaggeration of Our Days: When Tactics Become a Prison

In the last 10-15 years, this trend has gone out of control. Coaches like Allegri and Conte, for goodness sake with different ideas, ultimately

represent two sides of the same coin: a culture where error is the worst of deadly sins. Conte with his intensity and search for solidity, Allegri with his "managing" and "bringing home the result." The message is always the same.

And this mentality has spread like a virus, becoming the dominant culture. Here's how it shows in practice:

- Fear of making mistakes: In a league where you risk getting sacked after two bad matches, the watchword is "safety." And who is safer than a veteran who knows all the tricks of the trade? An 18-year-old kid, no matter how strong, is by definition an unknown. He can make mistakes, have a dip, feel the pressure. So? Better not to risk it, keep the seat warm with someone you already know.

- Tactics that kill fantasy: Cesare Prandelli, a former CT who knows his stuff, used a perfect word: "giocosità" (playfulness/excessive tactical rigidity). He meant the excess of tactics and the rigidity of patterns that suffocate kids' imagination. In youth sectors, they grow up with the obsession to win at all costs, they reward those who are physically stronger and those who execute the task, not those who invent something. Result? Young players arrive in the first team already "programmed," without having developed that unpredictable play or that dribbling that made the difference.

- Too much tactics is bad: And here's the final paradox. The hyper-tactical competence of our coaches becomes a boomerang. A young Spaniard or German is often thrown into a more fluid game context, where he can express himself. A young Italian is inserted into a rigid system where he has to learn 10 movements before even touching the ball. Tactics, from a tool for growth, become a cage.

The Consequences: Why the Youngsters Stay on the Bench

All this tactical evolution has created structural problems that explain those dramatic numbers we saw (that 1.9% of playing time for Italian U-21s, the worst in Europe, just to remind you).

1.The Paradox of Youth Academies

Our youth sectors, look, they work. The Under-17 and Under-21 national teams are strong. The point is different: the goal of Italian youth academies is not to produce players for the first team, but to win the Primavera championships. Cristian Brocchi, who knows about youngsters, was clear: the system rewards whoever wins the trophy, not whoever debuts three kids in Serie A. So they field the most physically imposing sixteen-year-olds, the ones who guarantee an immediate result, even if maybe they have less pure talent. The real phenomena, maybe skinnier but more technical, stay on the bench. An incredible contradiction.

2. The Foreigner is More Convenient

With the pressure for results and the hunger for experience, clubs have found a shortcut: the foreigner. By now we have over 68% foreign players in the squads, teams like Milan and Inter score almost only with them. The path is clear.

The CEO of Lega Serie A, Luigi De Siervo, said it without beating around the bush: "Today it's more convenient to buy a talented player than to train him." Translation: training is no longer a value, it's a cost. And those who think short-term prefer the "finished product" (often average) taken from abroad, rather than investing time and resources in an Italian kid.

3. The Invisible Wall for U-21s

And so the famous "glass ceiling" is created. An Italian kid, even a strong one, even a protagonist with the U-21 team, returns to his club and finds himself facing a wall. To gain experience he should play, but to play he must already be experienced. A vicious circle that leads him either to rot on the bench or to have to go abroad to look for minutes, as is happening to many promising youngsters.

Something is Moving: Signs of Hope

Luckily, not everything is to be thrown away. In recent years, some cracks in this rubber wall are starting to appear.

The Shockwave of Gasperini and De Zerbi

The turning point was represented by coaches like Gasperini and De Zerbi. Gasp's Atalanta showed that you can play offensive, aggressive, winning football even in Italy and with little money. His rampant 3-4-2-1 produced talents like Pessina and relaunched guys like Gosens.

Similarly, De Zerbi at Sassuolo created a laboratory of proactive football, based on possession and trust in young players. From there came Locatelli, Berardi, and Raspadori, who then became pillars of the National team.

These examples have shown three simple things: - You can win (or at least compete) by playing well.

Young Italian players, if you put them in the right context and give them trust, respond greatly.

- Tactics don't necessarily have to "destroy the game," but can be a tool to enhance the players' qualities.

The New Wave of Coaches

Today in Serie A, there's a new wave of coaches trying to follow this path. Thiago Motta with his ideas took Bologna to the Champions League. Vincenzo Italiano made Fiorentina a proactive and entertaining team. Fàbregas himself at Como is trying to apply the Spanish philosophy of valuing talent.

On one hand, the tradition of catenaccio left us with an obsession for control that suffocates creativity. On the other, the pressure for results pushed clubs to prefer the "safe" foreigner over the "uncertain" youngster.

The good news? It's not irreversible. The turning point began with courageous coaches like Gasperini and De Zerbi, who showed that you can play offensive and winning football even here. Today a new generation of coaches is picking up that baton, and clubs like Inter and Milan are starting to give trust to the kids.

In the end, the challenge is cultural, even before it's technical. We need to overcome the fear of error, accept that a young player can make mistakes, and invest in training as a value, not as a cost. Only then can we ensure that the successes of the youth national teams finally become the foundations of a new, great Italy.

Cesare Prandelli

8.

The Evolution of the Fantasista in Italian Football and the New FIFA Rules

Are the new FIFA rules helping or hindering the growth of those creative players in Serie A—the ones we call fantasisti? It's the kind of question that goes straight to the heart of what modern football is becoming.

Here's the honest truth: FIFA hasn't passed any specific law saying "no more creative players." There's no rule that directly targets the Tottis, Del Pieros, or Bagios of this world. But—and this is a big but—some broader FIFA decisions have created a kind of ripple effect that is making life harder for these artists on the pitch.

First Big Effect: More World Cup Teams = More Pressure

You'd think expanding the World Cup to 48 teams would reduce pressure, right? More qualified teams should mean less stress for the big football nations. But here's the strange thing—it's actually made everything more tense.

Think about Italy for a second. Even with more spots available globally, the way UEFA handles qualifications means that top-level national teams can still find themselves in absolutely decisive playoff situations. Just ask Gennaro Gattuso, who has been visibly frustrated by how precarious the situation is.

Here's where it spills over into club football. When national team

coaches are anxious about qualification, that tension doesn't stay confined to the national team staff. It filters into the entire football culture. Suddenly, there's this huge emphasis on winning at all costs. Results become everything.

And what does this mean for the fantasista? Well, if you're a club coach under pressure, are you really going to gamble on a "luxury player"—someone who needs freedom to roam and create—when you could choose a more reliable, tactically disciplined athlete who will follow instructions to the letter? Probably not. You'll play it safe. You'll prioritize the system over the individual spark.

This is the first way the environment has changed: more pressure from the international stage means less patience for creative freedom at the club level.

Second Big Effect: Now We All Think Like Fantasy Football Managers

This is truly fascinating and a bit closer to home. You know how much Italians love Fantacalcio, right? It was invented here in 1990, and it's practically a national obsession. Add the official FIFA/EA Sports video games that millions of us play, and you have an entire generation of fans—and increasingly clubs too—who think about footballers in terms of statistics. Goals. Assists. Clean sheets. Successful dribbles. Tackles won. These games reward players for filling spreadsheets with numbers.

So what happens when clubs start evaluating talent the same way? Suddenly, the deep-lying playmaker—the guy who controls the tempo, reads the game beautifully, and dictates play without always providing the killer assist—starts to seem less valuable. His contribution is harder to measure. He doesn't light up the stats sheet the way others do.

Clubs naturally start leaning towards players who fit the statistical model: more athletic, more direct, more explosive. Players whose contribution clearly shows up in the data.

Here's the really ironic part: a court in Genoa recently ruled that Fantacalcio is a legitimate form of creative expression. And it is! But at the same time, this gaming culture has quietly shifted the way we evaluate real footballers. We've become more data-driven and less romantic about the game. The magic that can't be measured? It's harder to justify when you're building a squad on a limited budget.

So, What's the Key Point?

If we're honest, the evidence points in one direction: FIFA's changes have probably made it harder for fantasisti to thrive.

Not through a direct attack on creative players. But because they've helped create a football world that is less welcoming to them. A world where:

- Results are everything, so coaches can't afford to carry a luxury player.

- Data is king, so players have to fill spreadsheets, not just paint pictures on the pitch.

- Athleticism and tactical discipline are prioritized over unpredictability and individual genius.

The beautiful, chaotic magic a fantasista brings? It doesn't fit neatly into a spreadsheet. And that's the challenge.

Where Does This Leave the Artists of Serie A?

The future of the fantasista in Italy probably depends on finding some kind of middle ground. Maybe it's about these players adapting just enough to fit into modern systems, while still maintaining their creative spark. Or maybe it's about the game itself rediscovering how much value there is in the unpredictable—those moments that can't be coached or quantified.

But What the Hell Is Going On? Have Young Italians Lost Their Imagination?

What a question! And I'll tell you straight away: it touches a raw nerve in Italian football. And the answer, based on what insiders have been saying for a while now, is a clear and resounding YES. Society has changed, daily life has changed, and we're seeing the consequences right there on the pitch, where our kids should be inventing plays and instead...

Sorry for harping on about the same problems in this book, but the changes are necessary and can't wait any longer.

Anyway, let's take stock of what former players, coaches, and experts are telling us. Get ready, because some things are truly infuriating.

Crazy Stuff: Goodbye Street and Parish Football (And With Them, Imagination)

This is the mother of all lost battles. Cesare Prandelli tells us, loud and clear: "There are no more parish centers, and they don't play in the streets anymore." Full stop. End of story.

But let's think about it for a moment. Our greatest fantasisti, the ones who made us fall in love with football, where did they learn? In the squares, on the streets, in the courtyards of parish centers. Hours and hours of playing without a coach bothering you, with a tennis ball or rolled-up rags, without patterns, without that famous "diagonal" they teach you at eight years old. The only rule was to have fun, try the step-over, humiliate your friend and hear him say "Try again, that doesn't count!".

It was an open-air creativity lab. You tried, you failed, you tried again until you got it right. Simple, right? Yet today this world hardly exists anymore. Cities are clogged with cars, parents are (rightly) more protective, and children's time is programmed minute by minute.

So yes, as Prandelli says, it's useless to cry over spilt milk and tilt at windmills. But we must have the courage to admit that when the parish centers and the ball chased in the street disappeared, we lost something huge. A piece of our footballing identity.

Insidious Poison: Exasperated Tactical Obsession in Youth Sectors

And here we come to the point that really gets on your nerves. Because if it's true that the street is gone, the problem is what we've put in its place. The answer? A ball-and-chain (literally) of tactics and patterns.

The example of Lamine Yamal and Prandelli's words are a slap in the face. Someone asked him: a talent like Lamine Yamal, if he had grown up in Italy ten years ago, would he have become the phenomenon he is today? Prandelli's answer is sharp, and it hurts: "No. We probably would have let him get away. Our coaches would have taken away his joy of playing, overwhelming him with patterns, diagonals, space occupation, second balls, and attacking against a set defense."

Do you realize? It's crazy. And Prandelli isn't the only one saying it. He calls it "madness" to teach professional concepts to eight-year-old children. And let's not even talk about the "win at all costs" culture. Tournaments for six-year-olds where, as Gian Piero Gasperini said,

"parents end up fighting in the stands." The message that gets across is devastating: winning is the only thing that matters, not having fun, not trying that nutmeg, not looking for the creative play.

And then there's another plague: physicality put before technique. Here too, Gasperini doesn't mince words: "Professional clubs tend to choose the tallest and strongest kids. That's not how you create champions." And he gives the example of Barcelona, which takes physically "normal" kids and focuses everything on technique. Respecting the characteristics of a Mediterranean country, where we're not all Dutchmen standing one meter ninety! And Bojan Krkić, who really grew up at Barcelona, adds fuel to the fire: if Barcelona had selected based on physicality, they would have lost Iniesta, Messi, and Xavi in one fell swoop. All three! Can you imagine a youth sector without those three?

The Invasion: Too Many Foreigners, Zero Space for Our Own

This is about the environment where our young players try to break through. Claudio Marchisio, who played alongside Pirlo and Totti, calls the situation "truly alarming."

And he gives an example that is a verdict: a Primavera team (the youth sector, the future!) won a title without a single Italian player on the pitch. And mind you, of those foreign kids, only 2% will become professionals. But in the meantime, during their crucial developmental years, they are taking the place of our own kids. The numbers are merciless: today just over 30% of players in Serie A are Italian, and there are teams that field zero players from their own youth system.

Rino Gattuso also had his say, talking about how the globalization of football and this "buy and sell" mentality has ruined the beauty of the game. And the data, unfortunately, prove him right. A recent CIES study confirmed that in Serie A, only 5.7% of total minutes are played by players trained at their own club. We're the last wheel on the cart in Europe, the tail light. The only shining exception is Atalanta, but for the rest, it's a desert.

Modern Malaise: Young Players, Money, and... Ferraris

Here's a new problem, one that perhaps didn't exist twenty years ago. The president of Serie A, Ezio Simonelli, raised the alarm about the mentality of today's young footballers.

His reasoning is simple and terribly true: when an 18-year-old kid already earns enough to buy himself a Ferrari, what's left for him to desire? Where does that "hunger" go, the one that has always been the engine of every champion? "If it were up to me," Simonelli said, "I would set aside part of their salary in a fund with the Federation. Because they need to be hungry, they mustn't feel like they've already made it."

And here we return to the starting point. The traditional fantasista was always forged in hardship, in the struggle to emerge, in failure and redemption. When that struggle is replaced by immediate wealth and comfort, something in the growth process gets jammed. As one observer commented, very down-to-earth: "Hungry dogs run faster." And that's how it is, whether we like it or not.

A Hope? Maybe We're (Finally) Waking Up

The picture is bleak, I know. But all is not lost. Because the important thing is that people are talking about it, and something is moving. The FIGC (Italian Football Federation) has launched the "Under-14 Project," coordinated by Cesare Prandelli and Maurizio Viscidi. And the idea behind it is revolutionary, for Italy: selecting young players based exclusively on technique. No physique, no results. They established eight technical commandments (dribbling, ball control, short and long passing, etc.) and gather the talents every month for training sessions focused purely on these skills. Finally!

The project's philosophy explicitly rejects the "win at all costs" culture at the youth level. Success is not measured by trophies won at 12 years old, but by the number of kids who, at 20, reach high levels and play in the Champions League or the World Cup.

Prandelli explains it as a necessary cultural change, and he does so with words that should be the manifesto of every football school: "We absolutely must recapture the playful aspect of football. Make these kids have fun. And if that one wants to dribble: let him do it." Enough with these patterns! Let them play, let them make mistakes, let them rejoice in a successful dribble.

As a Tuttosport editorial wrote, we're not even at the sowing stage yet, we're still plowing the field. But it's a necessary first step. After years of emptiness, someone has finally started to shake things up.

Italian society, everyday life, has changed. And in this change, we are making life impossible for our budding fantasisti. The streets and parish centers are gone, the youth sector is obsessed with tactics and

physique, and Serie A is a foreign fortress where our kids don't get in, and if they do, they might already have a Ferrari in the garage and hunger is just a memory.

But the fact that people like Prandelli, Gasperini, Marchisio are shouting all this, and that the FIGC has finally set a serious project in motion, tells us that maybe, just maybe, we've woken up. Will we manage to reverse the trend after twenty years of decline? That's a different kettle of fish. But at least, for the first time in a long time, someone is trying to plow the field.

"Italian football is suffocating.

And we are letting it die in silence.

Not because there is a lack of good kids, nor because passion has disappeared. It is dying because we have created a sick mechanism, which crushes dreams before a child can even kick his first ball.

We import players for crazy sums and, at the same time, are incapable of nurturing those born here. Today, the one with talent doesn't win; the one with money wins. If you are young and really want to try, it's no longer enough to be strong: you need a family behind you that can pay. If you don't have that, you're out. Invisible. Broken.

There are intermediaries who approach parents asking for money for kids who haven't even tasted real football. And those who don't accept the game? They are erased: no field, no call-ups, no future. This is not how you form footballers; this is how you build injustices.

We have forgotten one very simple thing:

talent cannot be bought.

Talent is discovered, accompanied, defended. Instead, we strangle it, push it away, force it to give up before it can even smell the grass under its feet.

The Federation should look this reality in the face, listen, verify, intervene. Because too many families tell the exact same story: if you don't pay, your child doesn't play. And at that point, it's no longer sport, it's no longer growth, it's no longer a dream. It's just business. Cold, ruthless, inhuman.

A boy born with a gift does not belong to agents or directors.

That gift is his.

Football should help him show it to the world, not bury it under the bank accounts of adults."

05/03/2026 cited by Gianni Rivera
www.facebook.com/100044328859415/posts/1488057722681842/?mibextid=rS40aB7S9Ucbxw6v

Gianni Rivera

9.

Now let's focus on tactics and its main interpreters throughout our history, and on their way of thinking and treating fantasisti.

{1} Vittorio Pozzo

Vittorio Pozzo and his "Metodo": The Inventor of System Football

Think of Vittorio Pozzo as that wise and slightly grumpy grandfather whom the entire Italian tactical school considers its founder. He wasn't the one who invented the "Metodo" (that 2-3-2-3 which caused a sensation at the time), but he was the first to refine it, to transform it into such a perfect machine that it led Italy to win two consecutive World Cups (in 1934 and 1938) and also an Olympic Gold in 1936.

Stuff that still gives you chills today. His idea of football rested on three fundamental pillars, which were his creed.

First: the strength of the group, understood in an almost military sense. His famous retreats weren't simple gatherings to get in shape; they were real training camps where an unbreakable mental bond was created, a kind of family of soldiers ready to do anything for each other. Second: tactical flexibility. The Metodo was such an intelligent system that it allowed the two inside forwards, the interiori, to have the task of dropping back and helping in defense whenever needed. Think about it: it anticipated by decades what we today call modern football, with team blocks and quick transitions. Third, and perhaps most important: the spirit of sacrifice. His motto was very clear, almost a promise you signed in blood: in the national team, only those willing to give everything for the shirt, to the last breath, get to play.

And here we arrive at the crucial point, the one that makes us understand why Pozzo is still studied and admired today. His relationship with the fantasista? Practically non-existent, in fact almost antithetical. He had players of excellent talent in his squad, people like Giuseppe Meazza and Giovanni Ferrari, but no one was authorized to be a prima donna. His football was a choral work, a symphony where individual poetry gave way to collective discipline, to the melody of the group. Great interpreters like Meazza were not free to invent wherever and however they wanted, perhaps roaming the field looking for the play. They were inside forwards, yes creative, but with very precise tasks, written in the score. They had to defend, drop back, occupy predetermined spaces. Even a champion like Meazza was "kept on a leash," called upon to work for the team, to sacrifice himself in the non-possession phase. His class was expressed within the system, not outside it. And the centre-forward, like the great Silvio Piola, was a finisher, a reference point, not a playmaker. He was the man who had to conclude, not invent.

In practice, Pozzo didn't even pose the problem of how to manage a fantasista, because the fantasista, in his conception of football, was not supposed to exist. It was better this way: distribute creative tasks among two or three athletic, disciplined, and intelligent players, who were first and foremost soldiers at the service of the collective. A choice on the pitch that today we would call courageous and very modern.

And this philosophy left an indelible mark on Italian football. Pozzo is the precursor of Arrigo Sacchi, without a doubt: both demanded physical fitness, discipline, and the subordination of talent to the group.

His Metodo retired old-school football and demonstrated, once and for all, that to win you need organized systems and complete players, not improvisation. He paved the way for all Italian coaches who would put the system at the center, from Helenio Herrera to Antonio Conte. The Italian obsession with tactics, the defensive phase, and the collective begins with him.

Ultimately, Vittorio Pozzo didn't have a policy on the fantasista: he had a philosophy contrary to his very existence. He dismantled the idea of the single creator to distribute genius among multiple industrious interpreters. His Metodo was the first great demonstration that a perfect system, executed by disciplined athletes, can be stronger than any solitary genius. He didn't just coach footballers: he shaped the very concept of creativity, bending it to the will of the group. In the history of the fantasista, Pozzo was the first and perhaps most formidable opponent, and at the same time the greatest architect of an idea of football that we still carry in our DNA today.

{2} Nereo Rocco

Nereo Rocco: The Lord of Catenaccio with a Heart of Gold

Thinking of Nereo Rocco only as a priest of catenaccio is reductive. In reality, he was a pragmatic realist who believed in a simple but powerful idea: a very strong defense is the foundation that allows fantasy to fly. At Milan, where he won everything, his philosophy was clear:

1. Perfected Catenaccio: He used a 1-3-3-3 that in defense became a 1-4-3-2. The secret? The libero (like Cesare Maldini), a sort of brilliant "sweeper" behind a line of man-marking defenders. A perfect safety net.

2. Direct and Vertical Football: No possession for its own sake. Rocco loved the "long ball": quick, long passes from defense to attack, to skip the midfield melee and exploit space.

3. Grit and Psychology: His teams were very tough, physically imposing, and masters in the art of "cunning" on the pitch. Above all, he valued "grinta," the will to fight.

Rocco's Fantasista: Gianni Rivera, "The Protected Jewel"

The relationship between Rocco and Gianni Rivera ("The Golden Boy") is the most beautiful story. Rivera was the antithesis of Rocco: an elegant attacking midfielder, a poet of the ball who avoided tackles and lived for the decisive assist.

Rocco managed Rivera with a unique mixture of pragmatism and love:

- Total Tactical Protection: Rocco built the entire system to protect Rivera's weaknesses and maximize his genius.

- The "Bodyguards": Behind Rivera, he deployed tireless, physical midfielders like Giovanni Trapattoni and Bruno Bolchi. They did the running, the tackling, the dirty work. They "covered" so Rivera could "uncover."

- The Libero's Safety Net: Behind them, a libero like Maldini cleaned up any potential errors. Rivera was protected by two rings of defense.

- Absolute Offensive Freedom: When Milan had the ball, Rivera had carte blanche. He was the sole brain, the obligatory conduit. Defenders and midfielders would recover the ball and immediately look for him. Rivera, from there, would orchestrate the play for finishers like José Altafini and Pierino Prati. Everything went through him.

- A Stormy but Productive Relationship: Rocco and Rivera often argued. Rocco, the grumpy Triestino, would publicly criticize Rivera's lack of defensive willingness. Rivera felt misunderstood. But this friction was creative. Behind the harshness, Rocco hid great tactical understanding: he created pressure to spur on his star, while on the field he built walls to protect him. His famous phrase says it all: "I put him on the field to make him run as little as possible."

Tactical Scheme: Rocco's Milan (60s)

(Goalkeeper) Cudicini

(LIBERO) Maldini

(Terzino) David (Defender) Trebbi (Terzino) Schnellinger

(Mediano) Trapattoni (Mediano) Bolchi (Winger) Sormani

(ATT. MIDFIELDER) Rivera

(Striker) Altafini (Striker) Prati

Structure: A 1-3-3-3 that becomes a 1-4-3-2 in defense.

Rivera's Role: Isolated in a free central zone. Zero defensive duties. The two central midfielders (Trapattoni and Bolchi) form a protective "V" behind him.

Flow of Play: Defenders/Ball recoverers → Rivera → Attackers.

The Mark on History

- The Italian Archetype: Rocco perfected the "catenaccio with the number ten" model. For 20 years, Italian football was this: a granite defensive block + a luxury playmaker.

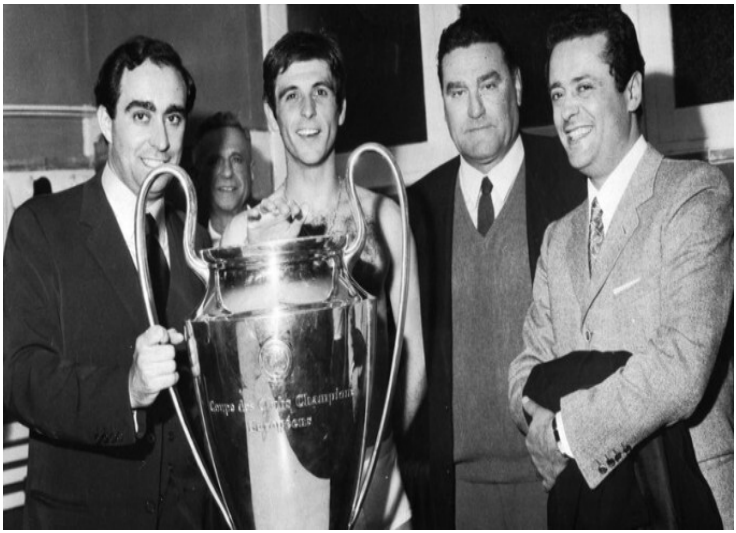
- Pragmatic Romanticism: He demonstrated that the most defensive system could coexist with the most refined talent. He didn't try to turn Rivera into a warrior; he transformed the team to adapt to Rivera. The opposite of what Sacchi or Bielsa would do.

- The (Unintentional) Precursor of Sacchi: Ironically, his system contained the seeds of its own end. The dependence on a single creator made the team predictable. A generation later, Arrigo Sacchi would rebel precisely against this model.

- The Coach as Protector: Rocco established the role of the coach as a shrewd protector of talent, using tactics to cover the flaws of his most prized players. A lesson learned by coaches like Ancelotti (with Pirlo) and Capello (with Totti).

Conclusion:

Nereo Rocco's policy on the fantasista was a pragmatic sanctification. He didn't just "accommodate" a player like Gianni Rivera; he designed an entire footballing universe to revolve around him. He built a defensive fortress with a single, luxurious gate, and placed Rivera as its guardian. The fantasista was not a luxury; he was the essential, and specifically designed, weapon in an otherwise rugged and utilitarian army. Rocco represents the apex of the catenaccio-fantasista duality, a philosophy that defined the identity of Italian football for decades.



{3} Helenio Herrera

The Genius Architect

Okay, after talking about "grandfather" Pozzo, it's time to get to know another crazy character, probably the most charismatic and discussed of those years: Helenio Herrera, the "Mago" (Wizard) to everyone. If Pozzo was the wise founder, Herrera was the brilliant and somewhat dictatorial architect who brought discipline and tactics to almost manic levels, winning practically everything with his Grande Inter.

His idea of football, with that perfect (and fascinating) mix of Italianness, was an evolution of Pozzo's rigor taken to the extreme, with a healthy dose of psychology and provocation added. Let's look at it together, as we did with the other.

Herrera and Tactics: When the Game Becomes a Wall and a Slingshot

If Pozzo had refined the Metodo, Herrera went down in history for bringing catenaccio to its maximum splendor. But pay attention: just as Pozzo hadn't invented his formation, Herrera didn't invent catenaccio either (the foundations had been laid by the Austrian Karl Rappan and our own Nereo Rocco). He, however, transformed it into a perfect war machine, a lethal weapon that made all of Europe tremble. Here's what his idea was based on:

1. Total Defensive Organization (what they called "la Mandrakata"): Herrera's catenaccio featured a 4-man defensive line with a libero (the

mythical Armando Picchi, "batidore líbero") placed behind, a sort of "sweeper" who recovered balls and restarted the action. The non-possession phase was an obsession: double-teaming, suffocating man-marking, and a midfield (with full-backs like the iconic Giacinto Facchetti pushing forward) that had to stifle any opponent's creativity.

2. The Slingshot (i.e., the Lethal Counter-attack): But it wasn't just defense, eh! Herrera's philosophy was to absorb pressure in order to strike. As soon as the ball was won back, a lightning-fast, surgical counter-attack would start. Possession was mainly used to defend, while speed was everything in the attacking phase. His famous phrase, "Al fútbol se juega mejor con 10 que con 11" (which more or less means "you play football better with 10 than with 11"), gives you a clear idea of his mentality.

3. Total Control (Mind and Body): Here Herrera far surpassed Pozzo. He was an absolute pioneer in the use of psychology and athletic preparation. His legendary retreats were even stricter than his predecessor's. It's even said he hired detectives to check on the players' private lives! He wanted to know everything: what they ate, who they hung out with, everything. His goal was to create a united group, yes, but also one completely submissive to his authority. His weapons? Continuous motivational meetings, slogans on the dressing room walls (like "He who gives nothing, gives everything"), and an obsessive study of opponents, in an era with no video or computers.

Herrera and the Fantasista: Genius as a Cog in the Machine

Here's the key point: the relationship with the fantasista. If Pozzo fought him, Herrera shaped him and used him as a fundamental piece of his machine. He didn't exclude him; he channeled him into a precise path.

- Luis Suárez, the Spanish "Brain": His ideal interpreter was Luis Suárez Miramontes, the only Spaniard to have won the Ballon d'Or. Herrera wanted him at all costs from Barcelona to Inter. Suárez wasn't the classic fantasista like Rivera, free to roam the field. He was the playmaker, the brain of the team, positioned in midfield with the task of dictating the tempo, distributing long and short balls, and triggering counter-attacks.

- The Other Interpreters: Alongside him, Herrera fielded two other players of flair and fantasy, but always with precise tasks:

  - Sandro Mazzola: More advanced, he was the finisher, the one who would burst into the box and score.

  - Mario Corso: "The left foot of God," he acted as an attacking midfielder on the wing or between the lines, but his freedom was always functional to the counter-attacking system.

- The "No" to Kubala: His management of talent is perfectly illustrated by the story of Ladislao Kubala at Barcelona. Upon arriving, Herrera sidelined him because he considered him too old and no longer suitable for his project, preferring the young Luis Suárez. A very courageous and unpopular choice, which demonstrates how for him the system and discipline came before any famous name.

In short, Herrera couldn't stand the fantasista as a free and unpredictable artist. He wanted his brilliance, but he channeled it into a precise role, with defensive duties to respect (especially for Suárez) and freedom aimed exclusively at the counter-attack.

Comparison with Pozzo: Two Visions Compared

Here's a little table to see the differences between these two giants:

Vittorio Pozzo (The Metodo) Helenio Herrera (Catenaccio) |

Tactical System Metodo (fluid 2-3-2-3) Catenaccio (4-man defense with libero)

Defensive Philosophy Collective, inside forwards dropped back Total, obsessive, with a "sweeper" libero

Talent Management Controlled, at the service of the group, distributed Channeled, functional to the system, used as a trigger |

The Fantasista Fights him, makes him superfluous by distributing creativity Shapes him, uses him as a cog (e.g., Luis Suárez)

Psychology & Control Strong team spirit and national pride (retreats) Maniacal control, detectives, extreme motivation

Ideal Example Meazza (genius at the service of the collective) Suárez (registering brain at the service of the machine) |

The Legacy: The Magician Who Changed Football Forever

Herrera's imprint is indelible. He transformed football into a game of total strategy, where mental and physical preparation count as much as talent. He is the precursor of coaches like José Mourinho, with whom he shares the ability to create an "us against the world" mentality, an iron defense, and the skill to handle media pressure. His Grande Inter demonstrated that a perfect system, executed by disciplined athletes with a couple of geniuses at its service, can dominate the world. In practice, Herrera didn't eliminate the fantasista: he transformed him into a genius soldier, the most precious of his cogs. And perhaps, in this, he even surpassed old Pozzo.

{4} Edmondo Fabbri

Fabbri and the Fantasista: Two Stories, One Man. That Strange Love Between Order and Poetry

You know what's beautiful about talking about Edmondo Fabbri? That it's never a straight path. It's a labyrinth. You try to find his "idea" about the fantasista, the number ten, the genius, the tightrope walker… and at first, you seem to find nothing. Search engines look at you and shrug: no statements, no treatises, no interviews where Fabbri takes the lectern and explains his philosophy.

So then? So then you stop, look closer, and realize that's precisely the beauty of it.

Fabbri never talked about the fantasista. He just had him play. And he did it in two ways that seem to come from two different people.

It's as if he had two careers, two souls, two ways of loving football. And it's right there, in that split, that his truest story lies.

The First Fabbri: The One Who Put Rivera and Mazzola on the Same Train

Let's start with the first one. The one many, over time, have forgotten.

Before Korea, before the black legend, before the world remembered him as the man who lost to North Korea, there was another Fabbri. A young, curious coach, with a head full of ideas and the courage to try them. They called him the "Little Brazil," if only for this: because when he coached Mantova, in an Italy still in love with catenaccio and "don't concede first," he dared to propose a cheerful, offensive style, based on possession and quality.

Then they called him to the National team. And here comes the move that makes him special.

The Italy he inherits is a dull, distrustful, wounded team. What does he do? He doesn't look for an extra defender, he doesn't barricade himself. He does exactly the opposite. He takes three guys – Sandro Mazzola, Gianni Rivera, Giacomo Bulgarelli – and says: "You are my midfield. The team revolves around you."

Think of the courage, back then. Three number tens, three fantasisti, three players who wanted the ball at their feet to create. On any other Italian bench, someone would have left out at least one, "for balance." Not him. He put them together, side by side, and said: play. And they played. And Italy, between 1962 and 1966, won 17 out of 25 matches.

This is his first soul. The one that considered the fantasista not a luxury, but a solution. Genius wasn't the problem. It was the answer.

Sandro Salvadore (c), Roberto Rosato, Giacinto Facchetti, Paolo Barison, Tarcisio Burgnich, William Negri; crouched: Bruno Mora, Gianni Rivera, Giacomo Bulgarelli, Sandro Mazzola e Giovanni Lodetti. Gli Azzurri **che hanno vinto 6-1 alla Polonia, il 1° novembre 1964, allo Stadio Olimpico di Roma, nelle qualificazioni europee per i Mondiali del 1966.**

The Second Fabbri: When the Scissors Clipped the Poet's Wings

Then, eight years later, the return. It's 1974, Fabbri sits on the Torino bench. And here everything changes.

He invents the "Forbice" (Scissors). A beautiful metaphor, tactically fascinating. The team is a pair of scissors: the central striker, dropping deep, acts as the pivot; the two wings are the blades, cutting through the opponent's defense with their runs.
On paper, it's brilliant. In practice, there's a problem.

The pivot of the scissors is called Paolo Pulici. "Puliciclone" to everyone. A pure talent, a kid who had goals in his blood and fantasy in his feet. A striker who, before being a centre-forward, was a poet.

Fabbri transforms him. He drops him deep, has him play as a target man, turns him into an assist-man. He sacrifices his fantasy to exalt the blades, Ciccio Graziani and Paolino Pulici (yes, the other Pulici, Claudio, the "Puliciclone" was him).

The critics don't buy it. Newspapers write that "the scissors cut Sala's talent." Because you can't make an engineer out of a poet. You can try, but you lose the poetry.

The next year, Gigi Radice arrives, looks at Sala, and without a second thought sends him back wide, to the wing. Freedom, fantasy, goals. And the scudetto.

The Fabbri Paradox: Was He a Progressive or a Pragmatist?

Now, let's stop for a moment and look at the complete picture.

Fabbri, the one who in '62 had put three fantasisti on the field and won everything, ten years later takes a fantasista and turns him into a labourer. Why?

Because he wasn't an ideologue. He didn't have a "policy" on the fantasista. He had a "necessity."

- When he had Rivera and Mazzola, he said: "They are too strong, I have to make them play together. The rest will adapt."

- When he had Sala and needed the scissors to work, he said: "I need a pivot. You sacrifice yourself. The common good comes first."

It wasn't inconsistency. It was, simply, realism.

And perhaps, this is his drama. Because history is ungrateful: it only remembers defeats, forgets revolutions. It remembers Korea, forgets that Fabbri was the first, in Italy, to have the courage to say: "Let's put Rivera and Mazzola together, and let's play for them."

Today, in a football where everyone talks about "balance" and "sacrifice," almost no one remembers that the first to dare the opposite was him. That the fantasista, for Fabbri, wasn't a problem to manage. It was a gift to be valued.

Maybe he never explained his philosophy. But, deep down, he told it to us on the pitch. And that, in the end, is the only way that counts.

{5} Ferruccio Valcareggi

Valcareggi and the Fantasista: When You Have Two Geniuses and Have to Choose (So Instead You Invent the Relay)

So, make yourself comfortable. Because what I'm about to tell you is a true Italian story. In fact, it's the quintessential Italian story: two incredible talents, a coach in the middle, and an entire country divided in two.

The Problem: Not That There Was a Lack of Champions. The Problem Was There Were Too Many.

Let's start with Ferruccio Valcareggi, coach of the National team between the 60s and 70s. And let's immediately dispel a myth: Valcareggi loved number tens. He wasn't one of those old-school coaches who look at the fantasista and think, "Uh, what a luxury, better someone who runs." No, his problem was exactly the opposite.

His problem was that he had two. Two genuine phenomena. Two players who gave you a headache, but from an excess of riches.

And here comes the first question, the one that makes you understand everything: how do you make two suns coexist in the same sky?

The Two Suns: Mazzola and Rivera, Two Italies, Two Worlds

On one side was Sandro Mazzola. An Inter fan, Herrera's protégé, raised on bread and catenaccio. A train when he set off with the ball, a spring when he sprinted. He sought the goal, wanted it, demanded it. He never backed down, never lowered his head. He was the Italy that got up early in the morning, that filled the factories, that came home with calloused hands and a straight back.

On the other side was Gianni Rivera. Milanese, Ballon d'Or winner, Rocco's protégé. He didn't run: he thought. He seemed still, yet he'd already seen three moves ahead. His foot was a wand, his pass a caress. He was the Italy that sat in cafes to discuss, that read books, that dreamed with open eyes.

Two ways of being on the pitch. Two ways of being in the world.

And you, Valcareggi, have to choose. Or find a loophole.

The Relay: The Compromise That Made History

Valcareggi found the loophole. And they called it the "staffetta" (relay).

What was it about? Simple: one half each. Mazzola played the first, Rivera the second. Never together. Never one next to the other. Two champions passing the baton like two torchbearers, without ever sharing the same flame.

Today, thinking about it, it seems almost absurd. Two such champions, and you make them take turns? It's like having a Ferrari and a Lamborghini in the garage and using them every other day. "Today the red one goes out, tomorrow the yellow one." Unacceptable, right?

Yet, back then, it had its own logic. Put yourself in Valcareggi's shoes: putting them together would have meant revolutionizing everything. Changing the formation, sacrificing balances built over years of work, opening a new front full of risks and unknowns. And for a national team coach, risk is like fire: you look at it, admire it, but if you get too close, you get burned.

Thus, the relay became the middle-ground solution. The one that satisfied no one, but at least didn't tear the dressing room apart.

Mexico '70: The Day Doubt Became Legend

EL ESTADIO AZTECA, RINDE HOMENAJE A LAS
SELECCIONES DE:
ITALIA (4) Y ALEMANIA (3)
PROTAGONISTAS EN EL MUNDIAL DE 1970, DEL
"PARTIDO DEL SIGLO"
17 DE JUNIO DE 1970

Then came the World Cup in Mexico. 1970. Italy flies, enchants, reaches the final against the strongest Brazil ever. The relay worked, the team is solid, compact. Here we are, it's the moment of glory.

Then the match. Brazil runs rampant, Italy chases, and Rivera… Rivera comes on in the 82nd minute. When it's already too late, when destiny is already written, when the Cup is already yellow and green.

And there, for the first time, everyone asks themselves the same question: "What if he had come on earlier? What if they had played together?"

A question with no answer. That becomes regret. That becomes accusation. That becomes, for decades, the stain on Valcareggi's career.

The man who didn't dare. The coach who had two loaded guns and only used one at a time.

A Country Divided: Mazzola or Rivera? Which Side Are You On?

And here's the beautiful part. Because that relay, born as a technical

solution, immediately becomes something much bigger. It becomes the mirror of an Italy split in two.

Off the pitch, in bars, in homes, in factories, everyone had an opinion. And everyone cheered for their number ten.

There was the Mazzola fan base: "He runs, he fights, he never gives up. Football is sacrifice, not just poetry. If you don't have the lungs, you get nowhere."

And there was the Rivera fan base: "He sees what others don't see.

Football is genius, not just hard work. If you only have muscles, you stay on the ground."

And Valcareggi? He was in the middle. Trying to hold together the pieces of a vase that someone, every day, tried to break.

He never satisfied anyone. Perhaps, simply, because it was impossible.

But He, Valcareggi, What Did He Really Think?

Here's the million-dollar question. Because if you look for a statement, a phrase, a half-interview where Valcareggi explains his philosophy on the fantasista… you won't find it. Or rather, you find emptiness.

No treatises. No manifestos. Only his choice, repeated day after day, match after match.

But perhaps, the fact that he never talked about it is already an answer.

Valcareggi wasn't a theorist. He was a practical man. He didn't have a "vision" of the fantasista. He had a concrete problem: two champions who, together, he didn't know how to make work. And he looked for the solution that seemed the least bad.

Someone, intelligently, defined the relay as "at the same time a limit and a resource." A compromise. A precarious balance. An honest, perhaps clumsy, attempt not to waste anyone.

Not out of cowardice. Out of pragmatism.

Paradox: The Problem Wasn't Scarcity, but Abundance

I want to tell you another thing. In 2010, Italy goes to the World Cup in South Africa. The team is listless, grey, without ideas. There's no number ten, no one to turn on the light. Roma fans, desperate, display a banner: "No Totti, No Party." It's the symbol of a National team without a soul, of a football that has stopped dreaming.

Now, think of Valcareggi. He didn't have the problem of "finding" a fantasista. He had the problem of managing two. Two!

Today, years later, it's almost laughable. "Poor Valcareggi, he had too many champions, he didn't know how to put them together." What a tragedy, eh? What a luxury. What a cross to bear.

But perhaps, this is the key to judging him more kindly.

History's Judgment: Harsh, Merciless, a Bit Unfair

History, as we know, is not kind to losers. Valcareggi has gone down in the books as "the man of the relay." The coach who couldn't choose. The one who lost a final and took all the blame.

But if you think about it carefully, it's a bit of a cruel judgment.

Valcareggi wasn't a conservative who hated fantasy. He was a man of his time, raised in a football where balance was everything and risk was avoided like the plague. Did he put Rivera and Mazzola next to each other? No. He didn't succeed, he didn't have the courage, or perhaps he didn't find the right key.

But at least he put them both in the squad. He called them up, made them play, didn't exclude anyone.

In an age of dogmatism and rigid patterns, perhaps even that was already a small miracle.

What Remains: A Lesson, Half a Century Later

Today, talking about Valcareggi and the fantasista means talking about an Italy that no longer exists. An Italy that churned out number tens like bread, that argued in bars about who was stronger, that was passionate about a duality that became legend.

The relay ended fifty years ago. But the debate, deep down, is still alive. Because football, like life, is always there: trying to bring together order and fantasy, discipline and genius, reason and heart.

And Valcareggi, with his imperfect solution, left us a simple lesson, and perhaps precisely for this reason, true:

You can't always have everything. You can't always keep all the jewels. But sometimes, settling for a compromise isn't cowardice. It's just the way you found not to lose anyone.

Valcareggi, Capello e Sandro Mazzola

{6} Enzo Bearzot

Bearzot's Tactics: When a Man with a Pipe Taught Italy to Play (and to Win)

Okay, my friend, make yourself comfortable because this is one of those stories you absolutely need to know. Because talking about how Enzo Bearzot's teams played isn't like flipping through a boring tactics manual. It's much more beautiful.

It's the story of a gentleman with a boxer's nose, a pipe always lit, and the air of a grumpy professor, who one day took Italian football, shook it up good, and told it: "Listen, let's stop this here. From today, we do it my way."

And the crazy thing? He was right on all counts.

The First Move: Throw Away Catenaccio, Keep What's Needed

We have to start from afar. It's 1975, Bearzot sits on the Italy bench and looks around. What he sees is a beautiful but stiff team, a prisoner of its own myth.

Catenaccio, that defensive wall that had made Herrera's Inter win everything and terrorized half the world, had by now become a cage. A gilded prison, yes, but still a prison. And the players inside felt cramped.

Bearzot takes two minutes to figure it out. And he does something that at the time seems almost like a betrayal: he starts looking at what others are doing. Especially Holland. That total football where

everyone attacks and everyone defends, where roles are exchanged and the ball moves fast, never knowing who is the defender and who is the attacker.

But watch out: Bearzot isn't one to fall in love with trends. He doesn't throw away tradition. He does better: he takes catenaccio and marries it with Dutch football. A bit from here, a bit from there. Thus, "Zona Mista" (Mixed Zone) is born.

In two words? You defend by zone when convenient, man-mark when needed. You don't hide in the box, but you don't overcommit either. Balance. Always balance. Bearzot repeated it like a mantra: "With defense alone you don't win, but with attack alone you don't win either."

Simple, right? Yet no one had thought of it before.

The Formation? beh, It Depends. Every Match Is a Story in Itself

Now, if you go on Wikipedia or stats sites, you'll find it written that Bearzot played with a 4-4-2. True. But it's also false.

Because Bearzot changed formations like he changed his pipe: depending on his mood, the tobacco, the opponent, how the lads had trained that week.

- Against Brazil in 1982, he pulled out a 4-4-2 with Rossi and Graziani up front and the midfielders tight to form a wall. It seemed like a chess match.

- Against Poland in the semi-final, he switched to a 3-4-1-2, with Antognoni free to create behind the strikers. A magician's move.

- Against Germany in the final, he instead set up a 5-3-2, with Gentile added to the defense to put a lock on Littbarski.

That's the point: Bearzot didn't have a fixed scheme. He had an idea. The idea was: "I study the opponent, I know my players, and I find the right solution for that evening."

No whiteboards full of arrows. Just brain and courage.

The "Vecio's" Lads: Each with Their Own Job

To understand Bearzot's tactics, you don't look at the formation. You look at what the individuals did. Because he didn't think in numbers

(4-4-2, 5-3-2, etc.). He thought in functions. Everyone had their task, clear as day.

Sandro Pertini con Bearzot

- Gaetano Scirea – The libero who played as a playmaker: Scirea was a libero. He had to defend, sure. But Bearzot told him: "Look, you're not just there to sweep. When you can, come out with the ball. Build. Create." And so Scirea became the first libero in history to set the play. He'd receive, lift his head, and launch it. Stuff we'd now call a "build-up player," but he did it from the back, with elegance.

- Marco Tardelli – The one who never stopped: Tardelli was the engine. He ran for 90 minutes without ever switching off. He recovered balls, brought them forward, passed them to Rossi, to Conti, to whoever was free. Bearzot called him his "box-to-box," even though no one used that word in Italy back then. He was the glue, the man who held the team together. Without him, the gears would grind.

- Bruno Conti – The imp without chains: Conti was organized chaos. A right winger who would start, cut inside, beat his man, cross, shoot. He drove defenders crazy, drove the crowd crazy. Bearzot never put a leash on him. In fact, he told him: "Do what you feel." Because he knew that certain players, if you bridle them, you extinguish them. He kept him switched on.

- Paolo Rossi – The centre-forward who came from Mars: Rossi wasn't a penalty-box poacher. He didn't stand there waiting for the ball like a

homing pigeon. He moved, dropped deep, came out of the box, looked for space, and then boom, run and goal. Bearzot waited for him for two years, when everyone thought he was finished, suspended, washed up. Because he knew that without him, his football wouldn't work.

- Claudio Gentile – The silent mastiff: And then there was Gentile. The one who would take Maradona, Zico, Rummenigge and make them disappear from the pitch. Bearzot told him: "See that one there? He's yours. He doesn't breathe, doesn't play, doesn't exist." Simple, ruthless, wonderful. In the mixed zone, he was the piece of catenaccio you couldn't throw away.

That Night at Sarrià: Italy-Brazil 3-2

July 5, 1982, Sarrià Stadium, Barcelona. Facing them is the strongest Brazil in history. Zico, Sócrates, Falcão, Éder. People who made love to the ball. Everyone writes Italy off. Not Bearzot.

Bearzot prepares for it like a battle. Studies, analyzes, hypothesizes, erases, rewrites. And on the night of the match, he pulls something out of the hat that no one expects. A strange, asymmetrical 4-4-2, with the lines very tight, midfielders doubling up, the defense not giving an inch.

Brazil attacks. And attacks. And attacks. Zoff saves everything. Gentile sticks to Zico like a stamp. Scirea sweeps and restarts. Tardelli runs like a demon. And Rossi, that kid who two years earlier couldn't even set foot on the pitch, scores three. Three goals against Brazil. Three slaps to the most beautiful football in the world.

That match is the perfect summary of Bearzot: tight defense, deadly counter-attack, individual genius at the service of the group. It's not catenaccio. It's not total football. It's Zona Mista. It's Italy winning because it's cleverer, not because it's stronger.

The Final: Cabrini Misses, Tardelli Shouts, the World Watches Us

Four days later, Santiago Bernabéu, final against Germany. Bearzot loses Antognoni to injury. No panic. Changes formation: 5-3-2, Gentile in, Cabrini locked on Kaltz, Bergomi on Rummenigge.

In the 25th minute, Cabrini misses a penalty. The first of his life. Anyone else would have felt like dying. Not Bearzot. From the bench, pipe in mouth, he gives him a sign. "Calm down, head up, we continue."

Then comes Rossi. Then Tardelli, with that goal and that scream that even today, if you watch it again, gives you chills. Then Altobelli. 3-1,

World Cup.

That evening, on the flight back, Bearzot plays cards with Pertini, Zoff, and Causio. The President of the Republic and the coach smoking and laughing together, like two mates at the bar. It seems like a scene from a Sordi film. It's the most beautiful photo in the history of Italian football.

The Real Secret: It's Not Tactics, It's Trust

So, what was Bearzot's secret? The scheme? The formation? The marking?

None of this.

The secret was trust.

Bearzot chose his lads and then never let them go. He protected them. He waited for them. When the newspapers tore them apart, he put up a media blackout wall and took all the criticism on his own back. When Rossi was suspended and forgotten by everyone, he said: "I'll wait for him, he'll play in the World Cup."

The players knew it. They felt it. And on the pitch, for him, they would have walked through fire.

This is Bearzot's tactics. Not a book of patterns. It's a way of being.

Not a system of play. A way of being in the world.

And perhaps, my friend, that's why even today, when someone talks about football with a capital F, the mind goes there. To that man with the pipe, to his lads, to that night in Barcelona when an entire jazz orchestra played the most beautiful symphony.

And won.

Bearzot and the Fantasista: When Genius Grabbed the Saxophone in the "Vecio's" Italy

Get ready, because this isn't just any football story. It's the story of a silent man, with his pipe always lit and his gaze lost in the smoke, who had a revolutionary idea in his head. His name was Enzo Bearzot, "il Vecio" to everyone, and his football was unlike any other.

He didn't draw up schemes. He listened to music.

And his National team, the one that in 1982 made an entire country cry

with joy, wasn't a team. It was a jazz orchestra. His words, verbatim. Stuff that leaves you speechless.

Jazz According to Bearzot: A Lesson You Don't Expect from a Friulian

Now let's take a step back, because this is important. Bearzot wasn't one of those coaches who fill the whiteboard with arrows and dots, who pin you to your piece of the pitch as if you were a stamp. No, he thought differently.

He listened to jazz. He loved jazz. And one day, almost without realizing it, he realized that jazz and football were the exact same thing.

So, with his Friulian calm, he put down in black and white what we can now, without fear, call his life philosophy:

"My National team was born as a jazz orchestra. The drums set the rhythm, just as the playmaker dictates the tempo of the game. The saxophone is the fantasista, the one who invents, who takes the spotlight. The double bass is the libero, capable of defending but also of building. The trumpet is the goalscorer, the one who sounds off at the moment of the goal. And you, the director? You are there for one reason only: to ensure that the soloist can play his solo. Because that's what gives you chills. That's what makes you win matches."

Let's stop for a moment. Let's reread that last part. "You, the director, must do it for the sake of the soloist's solo."

It's not a throwaway line. It's a manifesto. It's the exact opposite of what they thought in Italy for decades. It's not the fantasista who must adapt to the team. It's the team that must build itself around the fantasista. Because talent isn't a problem to solve. It's a solution to embrace.

The Man Who Didn't Love the Limelight (But on the Pitch Lit Everyone Up)

And here's the beauty of it. Because Bearzot, with this almost anarchic idea of football, was the shyest man you could imagine.

He was Friulian. From Joannis, in the province of Udine. Border people, used to defending themselves from the cold and from history. He himself said: "We are counter-attacking people. Reserved, shy. But always with the flash of revenge in our eyes."

Someone like that, you'd expect to have the code of man-marking tattooed on his heart. Instead, no. He sat there on the bench, pipe in hand, and waited for the saxophone's solo.

He didn't like to appear. He hated the limelight. "I need my solitude," he confessed. "I like to strum the organ, collect stamps, look at statuettes. Appearing? No, that's not for me."

Yet, that same shy man, almost awkward off the pitch, had the courage of a lion on it. Because playing three forwards in the 80s, in Italy, wasn't normal. It was heresy. And he did it. Without fear. Without second thoughts.

But above all, he defended his fantasisti like a father protects his children. When everyone thought Paolo Rossi was finished, he waited for him. When they said Antognoni was too lightweight, he put him at the center of the project. When Bruno Conti seemed just a funambulist without substance, he told him: "Run, jump, have fun. I'll take care of it."

This is Bearzot's greatness. It wasn't his formation. It was his trust.

But Who Was the Saxophone, in That Orchestra?

We get to the point: who played the solo in the 1982 Italy?

The answer is more complicated than it seems. Because Bearzot didn't have a classic fantasista, one of those with the 10 on his back and a slow stride. His football was dynamic, modern, almost futuristic for the era. And so, the saxophone changed its face depending on the moment.

- Sometimes it was Bruno Conti. That imp with curls who started from the right and looked like a kid who'd escaped from the youth team. Dribbling, nutmegs, crosses, shots. Unpredictable. Uncatchable. Jazz-like, precisely. Bearzot watched him and smiled under his breath.

- Sometimes it was Gaetano Scirea. A libero. But what a libero. Not one who just swept away the danger. Scirea would come out with the ball, invent the counter-attack, provide assists with the delicacy of a painter. He was the double bass that at some point left the rhythm section and took its own solo. Bearzot never stopped him. Because in jazz, everyone can improvise. The important thing is to return to your place when the phrase ends.

- Sometimes it was Paolo Rossi. He was the trumpet, the goalscorer. But in the darkest moments, when he wasn't scoring and everyone

criticized him, Bearzot kept playing him. Because he knew that the most beautiful solo would come at the right moment.

And it came. July 5, 1982, Italy-Brazil 3-2. That wasn't a match. It was a concert. Rossi scored three goals, but Conti danced on the wing, Scirea drew football, Cabrini pushed forward, Tardelli shouted his joy to the world. And Bearzot, on the bench, smoked his pipe and watched.

He had done his job. He had brought the musicians together, chosen the rhythm, given trust. Now it was their turn to play.

The Vecio's Copernican Revolution

Let's go back to that phrase, because it deserves to be framed.

"You, the director, must do it for the sake of the soloist's solo."

Try to think about it. For years, in Italy, the fantasista had been a problem. "He's strong, but how do we fit him into the team?" "Yes, but he doesn't run." "Yes, but he loses the ball." "Yes, but he's a luxury we can't afford."

Bearzot turns everything upside down. It's not the fantasista who is the problem. It's the coach who doesn't know how to put him in a position to express himself.

He doesn't ask the saxophone to play like a drum. He asks the drum to keep time so the saxophone can fly. It's simple. It's brilliant. It's a Copernican revolution.

And he applies it without proclamations, without press conferences, without tactical books. He applies it with facts, with choices, with trust. Because Bearzot wasn't a theorist. He was a practical man. And practice proved him right.

What He Left Us

Today, when you hear "there are no more fantasisti," "modern football has killed them," "too much tactics, little fantasy," think of Bearzot.

He didn't complain. He built. He didn't regret the past. He imagined the future.

And he left us a legacy that goes far beyond the tricolor sewn on his chest. He left us an idea. The idea that talent is not a luxury, but a necessity. That fantasy is not an option, but the engine of the game.

That the task of the coach is not to bridle genius, but to build around him the conditions for him to express himself.

Bearzot was a man from Friuli. Counter-attacking people, used to defending, gritting their teeth, not being noticed. Yet, with his jazz orchestra, he taught all of Italy that the greatest courage, sometimes, is letting them play.

The saxophone. The soloist. The fantasista.

He wasn't afraid of him. And perhaps, this is his most beautiful teaching.

{7} Giovanni Trapattoni

So, how did "Il Trap" treat these artists of the ball? The answer in two words: he loved them, his fantasiste... up to a point.

Here's the fascinating contradiction in his way of seeing football: on one hand, he built his strongest teams around generational

champions, true geniuses of creativity. On the other hand, over the years, his tactical evolution slowly pushed them aside, almost suffocated them. It all depends on when and where you look in his career.

Let's look era by era, because this is where the story gets really interesting.

Juventus 1976-1986: The Golden Age, When Trap Loved Champions

This is the Trapattoni that romantic fans remember with a smile. At Juventus, he didn't just tolerate creative players: he literally built everything around them.

His masterpiece was called "Zona Mista" (Mixed Zone). Try to imagine a perfect tactical crossroads: the defensive solidity of old catenaccio mixed with the freedom of zonal marking. And at the center of all this? Pure art, pure fantasy.

Michel Platini arrives in Turin in 1982, and the way Trap treats him is already a statement. President Gianni Agnelli, "l'Avvocato," tells him a legendary phrase: "Dear Trapattoni, I didn't buy Michel Platini to see him play as a central midfielder. Put Furino to run and let Platini be creative."

And Trap? He listens, obeys, and... wins. Everything.

The scheme was perfect: behind Platini, he placed perpetual motion machines like Marco Tardelli and Giuseppe Furino, those who ran, pressed, did the "dirty work." Up front, intelligent strikers like Paolo Rossi or Zbigniew Boniek who moved into the right spaces. And Platini? He had carte blanche to roam, invent, be the artist he was.

Trap's philosophy from those years? A wonderfully paradoxical phrase: "The players are free to do what I say." In this phrase lies all his genius: discipline and creativity are not enemies, on the contrary. Creativity lives and thrives only if inserted into a solid structure.

Another perfect example? Liam Brady at Juve (1980-82). The Irish playmaker had the keys to the midfield, dictated the tempo, and Trap let him do it, with Tardelli and company acting as squires.

So, at Juventus, the treatment reserved for fantasisti was royal: protected, celebrated, central. He had understood a fundamental thing: you need both artists and soldiers. One without the other gets nowhere.

Italian National Team 2000-2004: Something Begins to Change

Here things get more complicated. Trap inherits the Italy team after Euro 2000, and at first, he seems to want to apply the same recipe.

Francesco Totti becomes his undisputed attacking midfielder. For the 2002 World Cup, Trap builds the team with a 4-3-1-2 where Totti plays free behind Vieri and Del Piero. The three midfielders behind him? Pure workers: Tommasi, Zanetti, and Zambrotta. The exact same formula as Juventus: the artist protected by soldiers. At Euro 2004, he even tries to insert a young Andrea Pirlo as a deep-lying playmaker alongside Totti, even if this meant leaving the midfield a bit exposed.

So far, so good. So what happened? Two fundamental things.

First: the results don't come. We are all convinced Italy deserved to win that World Cup, but we go out against South Korea in a more than controversial atmosphere. And then Euro 2004 is a total disaster: elimination in the first round, zero wins in knockout stages. The press crucifies him. It was said that many players couldn't stand him anymore.

Second, and this is the most important thing: the pragmatic Trap takes over. When results don't come and you feel the bench wobbling, coaches often cling to what is safer. That beautiful balance of Juventus gives way to a much more cautious and defensive approach. The fantasista, from a precious resource, begins to become a luxury that perhaps you can no longer afford when your job is at risk.

Ireland 2008-2013: The Fantasista? Dead and Buried

And then we get to Ireland. And it's here that Trap's evolution, or perhaps it would be better to say involution, becomes evident to everyone.

- The formation? A very rigid 4-4-2, without any variation.

- The midfield? Two mastiffs like Glenn Whelan and Keith Andrews. Run and destroy, no invention.

- The creative philosophy? Non-existent.

Critics called it "archaic," "prehistoric." A team "totally devoid of ideas and fantasy." A famous analysis recounted that Trap's Ireland allowed Xavi to set the record for passes in a single European Championship match. They weren't just beaten; they were literally suffocated by possession.

And the most painful detail? Ireland had a natural fantasista, Wes Hoolahan. A talented attacking midfielder, with superb technique, who played for Norwich, capable of opening any defense. And Trap completely ignored him. He preferred to drop Robbie Keane deeper, who was a striker, certainly not a playmaker.

Why? He explains it himself: "I gave them balance, and I emphasized that all 11 players must attack and defend... Have you ever wondered why certain forwards are no longer part of the team? Because they lost the ball and then stood there watching. But you also have to chase back and drop."

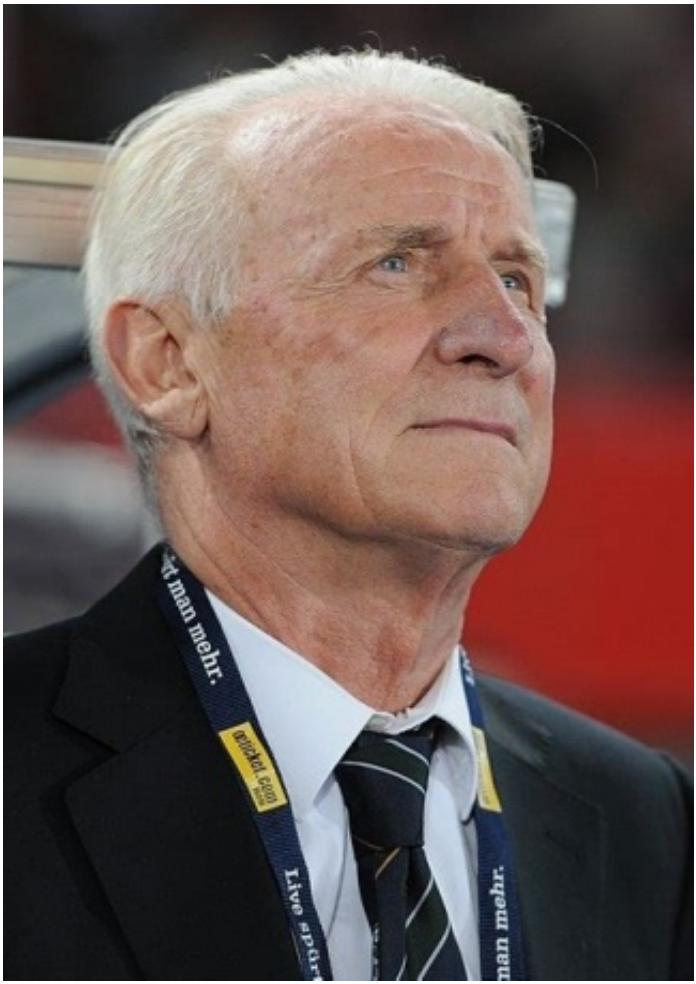
The fear of the fantasista who doesn't defend had completely taken over.

The Paradox of a Career

The drama, if you will, is that the young Trap had perfectly understood the balance. The old one, marked by defeats and obsessed with defensive security, had forgotten it.

A journalist once wrote a perfect thing: Trap's Juventus had demonstrated that "success is born from the balance between discipline and players' freedom, between tactics and creativity." With Ireland, only discipline remained.

If I'm honest, Trapattoni's story tells the biggest problem of Italian football with fantasisti. When you win, the artist is celebrated as a hero. When you lose, he's the first to be sacrificed. The pressure of results, especially at certain levels, makes coaches... well, a bit cowardly.



Trap had started as the coach who knew Platini needed protection, not a thousand instructions. He ended his career as the coach who saw in every creative player a potential defensive problem.

The question remains: was it an evolution, or maybe that was the real Trap? Perhaps the Juve era was simply the luxury of having endless champions and a secure job. And the Ireland era was the most authentic Trap: the pragmatist who, left without great players, clings to fear.

However you look at it, his way of treating fantasisti tells us something uncomfortable about football: art is beautiful, but when survival is at stake, coaches are ready to kill the artist. Always.

{8} Ottavio Bianchi

Ottavio Bianchi: The Silent Architect of Greatness

Ottavio Bianchi represents one of the most fascinating and authentic figures in Italian football, a man whose tactical vision was inextricably linked to a stoic and deeply ethical life philosophy. His name is rightly carved in history as the architect of Napoli's first, historic Scudetto, but reducing his legacy to "Maradona's coach" means not doing justice to the depth of his thought and the rigor of his method. Bianchi was much, much more: an intellectual of the ball, a man of principles in a world of appearances.

Here is a journey to discover the art and thought of this master.

The Tactical Vision: The Elegance of Order

Bianchi was a noble pragmatism, a tactician with a defensive mindset who built his teams from the foundations: solidity, discipline, and organization. His primary philosophy was to create a collective difficult to overcome, impeccable in the non-possession phase and lethal on the counter-attack.

- The Architecture: Analyzing his Neapolitan epic, the almost constant use of the 4-4-2 with a libero in the 1985-86 season clearly emerges. This system, sometimes defined as "diamond with libero," was not just a pattern, but an armor. The libero acted as a guardian angel behind the defensive line, granting full-backs and midfielders the freedom and

security to press without fear. His subsequent experience at Roma, with variations on the 5-3-2 and 4-3-1-2, demonstrates a tactical flexibility that never betrayed his creed: solidity as a starting point.

- The Rhythm of Play: His teams possessed a rare gift: patience. They were skilled at "studying and nullifying the opponent, then striking with deadly counter-attacks after winning the ball back." This counter-attacking style was the ideal theater for an artist like Maradona, highly skilled at dancing in the spaces that tired, unbalanced opponents left open. It was a system of order, waiting, and explosive transitions: the perfect synthesis between substance and spectacle.

- The Art of Adaptation: Bianchi was not a dogmatist. On the contrary, he was firmly convinced that the coach's task was to mold the system to the players available, a lesson learned from his masters. With rare clarity, he loved to recall that the most capable coaches, like himself or Gasperini, build the formation based on the players they have, and not the other way around.

The Thought: A "Fantasista" of the Bench

In football jargon, the "fantasista" is the brilliant and unpredictable attacking midfielder. Bianchi was one as a coach—not for tactical eccentricities, but for a unique, intellectual, and splendidly non-conformist approach to the game.

- On Character and Discipline: His proverbial severity wasn't born of arrogance, but from an incessant search for perfection, directed first and foremost at himself. "Only with myself. I was never happy with my work, I always sought perfection," he confessed. His famous mantra when presenting himself to a new team, "I only demand that everyone does their duty," was not a tyrannical warning, but the foundation of a professional pact based on shared responsibility and mutual respect.

- The Art of Managing a Genius (Maradona): His highest test was undoubtedly the management of Diego Armando Maradona. In an era of excess and psychological subservience, Bianchi had the simplest and most brilliant intuition: treat the greatest footballer in the world like a professional. He recognized the genius, but demanded from him the same "duty" he expected from anyone else. He created an orderly environment where Diego's creative madness could express itself without undermining the group's balance. His famous phrase, "it was easier to manage Maradona than someone who thought they were Maradona," reveals extraordinary psychological depth. Bianchi understood that authentic greatness brings with it a surprising clarity, while it's mediocrity that creates chaos.

- The Identity of an "Anti-Divo": Bianchi was the anti-divo par excellence, a man who shunned the limelight and didn't aspire to popularity at all costs. A conscious choice, the reflection of his conviction that a coach's job was to work, not to perform. He saw himself as someone who did his best in difficult situations, far from the spotlight. This awareness and this rejection of superficiality are the indelible mark of his uniqueness.

- Wisdom Beyond the Pitch: His deepest thought on football is perhaps the most revealing. In a 2018 interview, with disarming sincerity, he declared: "I never lost a second of sleep over football: there are more important things." This detachment, after a life dedicated to sport, is not cynicism, but the summa of a philosophy: for Ottavio Bianchi, football was a serious profession to be carried out with integrity, but it was not, and should not be, the totality of existence. A lesson in life, before even football.

Let's Dream a Little. An Imaginary Conversation Between Diego and Ottavio

(The door clicks shut. The stadium noise is muffled. Bianchi stands in the center of the room, looking not at the whole team, but directly at Diego. His tone is calm, measured—neither a whisper nor a shout. It's the tone of a man stating facts.)

"Diego. Look around this dressing room. Look at Ciro, look at Salvatore, look at Alessandro. They look at you. They always look at

you. Not because they want a spectacle, but because they need to know that you are with them.

I know what you can do with the ball. The whole world knows. They come to the stadium to see you dance. But football isn't played in the stadium of their dreams; it's played on the grass, in the mud, against men who want to cut you in two.

You heard me say it before: I only demand that everyone does their duty. Maybe you think your duty is to win the match alone. To pull out that moment of magic that no one else can see.

You're wrong.

Your duty, today, is to trust them.

When you're surrounded by three men and Ciro makes a run—pass him the ball. When you're tired and Alessandro is there to cover you—let him cover. Don't try to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, Diego. That's not why I made you captain. I made you captain so they would follow you, not so you would have to carry them.

It's easier to manage you than those who think they are you. You know this. Because you know the game must be respected. But respecting the game doesn't mean bending it to your will for ninety minutes. It means knowing when to bend it.

Wait. Be patient. First, we nullify them. Let them get tired chasing shadows. And then, when the space opens up, when the moment is right—then be the Fantasista. Then do what only you can do.

But until that moment, you are one of us. You do your duty, they do theirs, and we leave this field with the result we deserve.

Not because of one. Because of eleven.

Got it?"

[image]

{9} Arrigo Sacchi

Arrigo Sacchi and the Murder of the Fantasista: The Revolution That

Changed Football Forever

If Nils Liedholm was the patron who built the stage for his trusted artist, Arrigo Sacchi was the totalitarian director who literally rewrote the script, firing the old guard and demanding his actors become one with the scenery. His relationship with the fantasista wasn't complex: it was a real footballing murder, followed however by an unexpected resurrection. He killed one figure to create another, more suited to modern times.

To understand why Sacchi represented the end of an era for the classic number 10, we must immerse ourselves in his revolution.

The Indictment: Why Sacchi Had to Kill the Fantasista

When Arrigo Sacchi arrives at Milan in 1987, Italian football is a museum of granite certainties: the libero, man-marking, catenaccio as religion. He, a former shoemaker from Fusignano with no great playing career behind him, presents himself with the audacity to sweep it all away.

The three pillars of his revolution are equally three counts of indictment against the traditional fantasista:

- The Team as a Single Block (The Accusation of Individualism): Sacchi imposes that the distance between defense and attack should not exceed 25 meters. Everyone must be compact, a mobile phalanx. The classic fantasista, however, was a player who lived between the lines, often isolated from the rest of the team, waiting for the ball to create. In such a short block, that luxury no longer exists. There are no "free zones" where one can afford pauses or extemporaneous plays. The sentence is clear: the luxury of waiting is suppressed.

- Zonal Defense and Offside Trap (The Accusation of Immobility): His defenders must no longer mark a man, but guard a space, coordinated as in a ballet. The offside trap serves to "attack the opponent's attack." In this precision mechanism, the fantasista who moves without criteria, who drops deep to get the ball without a predetermined plan, is a disruptive element. He risks unsettling the line or constantly being offside. His freedom of movement is seen as anarchy.

- Collective Pressing (The Accusation of Laziness): For Sacchi, "pressing is not running and it's not working hard. It's controlling space." It means that when you lose the ball, everyone, absolutely everyone, must immediately become defenders to win it back. The traditional fantasista, often exempted from the non-possession phase,

was used to floating, waiting for the counter-attack. This, for Sacchi, is an inadmissible luxury. The number 10 must become the first defender. His "laziness" (often just a lack of habit) is a capital sin.

In this "robotic" and synchronized football, where every movement is studied on the drawing board, there is no space for the classic fantasista. The script is already written, and he must only follow it.

The Trial of Talent: The Subordination of Instinct to Reason

Sacchi's philosophy is a declaration of war on individualism for its own sake. His famous phrase is a real indictment: "I wanted people who knew how to play football, not phenomena."

Let's analyze the charges:

- The "Phenomenon" vs. The "Player": Sacchi makes a ruthless distinction. A "great footballer" may have technique and athleticism, but if he doesn't know how to put them at the service of the collective, he is not a "great player." The fantasista, in his most traditional sense (the misunderstood genius, the lackadaisical artist), falls dangerously into the first category. The metaphor of the play is perfect: "Football has a script. The actors... must follow the script." And that script leaves no room for unauthorized improvisations.

- Intellect before Talent: Sacchi looks for players with "the intelligence to understand him and the spirit to put that intelligence at the service of the team." His ideal man is not a dribbler, but a thinker like Carlo Ancelotti, of whom he said: "You don't play football with your feet, but with your head." It's the supremacy of tactics over technique for its own sake. The fantasista must think, not just invent.

- The Royal Proof: 5 vs. 10: The famous test of 5 defenders against 10 attackers is the queen's evidence. Five organized men beat ten disorganized individuals. It's the death sentence for the anarchic fantasista. No matter how good you are: if you're not part of the system, the system defeats you. Collective organization is not just superior, it is ontologically winning.

The Twist: The Paradox and the Resurrection

And here we arrive at the most fascinating paradox. Sacchi, the prosecutor who put the fantasista on trial, finds himself coaching two of the greatest individual talents in history: Ruud Gullit and Marco van Basten. Two players who lived to express their creativity, to invent plays. How does he resolve this conflict? He doesn't kill them. He

reintegrates them into a new organism.

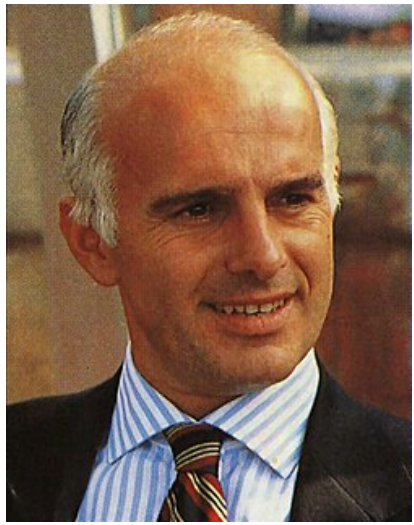
His move is brilliant. He doesn't bend the two phenomena to his system by force, but finds a balance by acquiring a third Dutchman, Frank Rijkaard. Rijkaard becomes the pivot, the "compensation mechanism" that provides stability and allows Gullit and Van Basten to have the freedom to express themselves, because they know there is a solid structure behind them.

- Van Basten: From a pure centre-forward, he learns to become the first defender, to press the opposing center-backs. His crystalline technique is channeled into movements functional to the collective. He is no longer just a finisher, but a fundamental pawn in the pressing mechanism.

- Gullit: His extraordinary athleticism and technique are put at the service of the team in every area of the pitch. He attacks, defends, sets up, finishes. He's the perfect example of the "new" fantasista, a total player who expresses his genius within a system.

Sacchi, the pragmatist that he was, understands that his theoretical utopia must come to terms with reality. He doesn't have the players to completely abolish the fantasista, so he reinvents him. He creates a new offensive archetype. A "fantasista" who bases his greatness not only on technique, but also on tactical intelligence, on the ability to move without the ball, to press, to be an active part of the collective. His players became "great, strong, because of their positioning and movement. That's what made them seem great."

So, Did Arrigo Sacchi Really Kill the Fantasista?



No and yes.

- No, he reinvented him: He created a new archetype of offensive player. A "fantasista" whose greatness is based not only on technique, but also on tactical intelligence, the ability to move without the ball, to press, to be an active part of the collective.

- Yes, he killed the traditional fantasista: The one who lived on the margins of the game, exempt from sacrifice, who could afford pauses and extemporaneous plays. The one who "didn't run" because he "thought." The one who, as Gianni Brera said, was an "attacking midfielder" often balancing between genius and unruliness. Sacchi made him an anachronism, a dinosaur unsuited to the new tactical climate.

His "football communism" left no room for improvisation for its own sake, but created the conditions for talent to express itself at unprecedented levels, thanks to a perfect machine that worked for him and for the team.

His legacy is immense. From Pep Guardiola to Jürgen Klopp, everyone has studied his Milan. Sacchi taught us that collective organization is not the prison of talent, but its highest expression. He killed the old fantasista to give birth to a new one, more complete, more modern, more functional.

And deep down, perhaps, that wasn't a killing, but a necessary metamorphosis.

Just yesterday (25/2/26), after Inter's defeat against Bodo/Glimt,

Sacchi released a statement:

(From `Football Italia` magazine)

"Arrigo Sacchi believes that 'it is necessary to ask some questions' about Italian football, after Inter, the strongest team in the country, was eliminated from the Champions League by Bodo/Glimt.

Inter were surprisingly eliminated yesterday evening in the Champions League play-offs, losing 2-1 at home to Bodo/Glimt. The Nerazzurri had also lost the first leg 3-1 in Norway last week."

But Sacchi is precisely among those who should be asking themselves questions. Because he is part of the problem. At the time, his tactics were the anti-fantasista par excellence. Sure, Milan won and the spectacle was extraordinary. The National team, under his guidance, also did excellent things. But—and it's a but as heavy as a boulder—we had the players. That Milan would have won big against anyone, even without Van Basten or Gullit. Rijkaard, in my opinion, was the only truly indispensable one, the necessary pivot. The rest were so superior to the competition that the system worked regardless. So, before asking questions, maybe Sacchi should look back and ask himself how much of his doctrine was truly revolutionary, and how much was simply wrapped in unrepeatable champions.

{10} Vujadin Boškov

Vujadin Boškov: The Gentleman Who Danced with Fantasisti

Vujadin Boškov embodies one of the most singular and beloved figures in the history of Serie A—a coach whose tactical wisdom was matched only by an extraordinary, rare human talent. His way of treating the "fantasisti," those unpredictable geniuses of football, was revolutionary: a miracle of empathy, intelligence, and lightness.

While many coaches tried to bridle creativity in rigid schemes, Boškov did exactly the opposite: he built golden cages where his artists could feel free. He didn't tame wild horses; he learned their language and convinced them to run in the same direction.

The Tactical Approach: Pragmatism with Elegance

Boškov was neither a tactical dogmatist like Sacchi, nor a pure Italian-style defensivist. He was something rarer: an architect of balance, capable of building highly disciplined teams that nonetheless breathed through the improvisation of their talents.

- Flexibility as a Signature: At Sampdoria, his masterpiece, Boškov tailored the system to his players. They started from an apparently classic 4-4-2, but in reality, it was a living organism that mutated depending on the phase of play. The numbers speak for themselves: in the 1990-91 Scudetto season, his Sampdoria conceded just 24 goals in 34 matches. An iron defense, which was however the prelude to deadly counter-attacks like daggers.

- Granite Foundations: The signing of Pietro Vierchowod was not just a market coup, but an act of love for security. A defender with superhuman speed and tactical intelligence, he became the beacon of the rearguard. Behind him, Gianluca Pagliuca in goal was an absolute guarantee. This defensive platform was not an end in itself: it was the springboard from which the fantasisti could take flight without fear of falling.

- The "Sampdoria Style": Boškov loved to say with his sly smile: "Watching Sampdoria play is like listening to beautiful music." And he was right. His teams knew how to suffer, knew how to drop deep when necessary, but always had the obsession to restart, to attack with purpose. It was total football, before the term became fashionable.

The Treatment of Fantasisti: A Masterclass in Human Management

But it's in the management of creatives that Boškov becomes a legend. He understood a truth that many coaches ignore: fantasisti don't need less discipline, but more understanding. They need to feel understood before being guided.

- Mancini and Vialli: The Goal Twins: The management of the Mancini-Vialli duo is a textbook of psychology applied to football. When Roberto Mancini, with his rebellious nature, opposed the idea of playing as a classic centre-forward, Boškov didn't challenge him on the battleground. With Olympic calm, he replied: "Okay, then tomorrow you'll have a free role." Naturally, Mancini ended up playing exactly where he was asked, but with the conviction that he had chosen it himself. He felt listened to, and that made the difference.

- One day, Mancini was anxious because he feared Luca Fusi wouldn't be able to mark Ruud Gullit. Boškov, with his proverbial calm, suggested using Vierchowod. And naturally, Fusi nullified Gullit. The lesson was clear and subtle: have faith in your teammates, the team is stronger than any champion.

- The "Terrorist in the Dressing Room" Episode: After one of Mancini's famous on-field outbursts, Boškov entered the dressing room at halftime and thundered: "Mancini, you're a terrorist in the dressing room!" The whole team burst out laughing, Mancini first. The tension melted like snow in the sun. As Mancini himself would later recount: "Like all intelligent people, he knew how to handle you." He didn't humiliate, didn't punish: he disarmed with irony.

- The Poetics of the Fantasista: Boškov had a poetic way of describing his talents. He compared a young and cocky Vialli to "a deer coming out of the forest": an image of power, grace, and wild nature. Of the very greatest, he said they "see highways where others see paths." A perfect definition of genius: the ability to simplify the complex, to see

shortcuts invisible to common mortals.

- Enlightened Democracy: His philosophy was encapsulated in a memorable phrase: "We are a democratic team. Everyone can speak. Then I decide." A perfect balance between listening and authority. The fantasisti had a say, they felt part of the project, but knew that in the end there was a captain at the helm. This gave them security, not frustration.

The Genius of Words: Wisdom Disguised as Humor

His famous aphorisms were not just entertainment, but real psychological tools, small pearls of Balkan wisdom wrapped in humor.

- "A penalty is when the referee gives it": A philosophical statement on the serene acceptance of decisions, on not getting agitated over what you cannot control. It sounds like a joke, it's a life lesson.

- "If we win we are winners, if we lose we are losers": The art of stating the obvious to remove pressure. It seems banal, but actually frees the mind from the anxiety of the result, bringing everyone back to the simplicity of the game. - "They are them, we are us": An invitation to focus on your own path, without being hypnotized by the opponent. The basis of all psychological security.

The Complete Philosophy: Teacher, Friend, and Policeman

Boškov summed up his creed in a phrase that should be carved at the entrance of every training ground: "The coach must be at the same time teacher, friend, and policeman." You can't be just one thing. You need to know how to teach, how to listen, and when necessary, how to set limits.

He succeeded with disarming naturalness, because at the base of everything was humanity. Discipline was not an authoritarian imposition, but a shared path, presented with intelligence and affection. This is why his fantasisti flourished: because they felt trusted, understood, and part of a collective mission greater than themselves.

His legacy lives on in the players he shaped. It lives on in Roberto Mancini, who as a coach applied those same lessons in managing complex talents like Mario Balotelli. It lives on in the memory of Francesco Totti, who never forgot who gave him his Serie A debut at just 16. It lives on in all of us who love football, as a reminder that true greatness lies not only in schemes, but in the heart with which you interpret them.

{11} Cesare Maldini

Cesare Maldini: The Noble Father of Italian Football and the Inventor of the Defender Who Dreamed

Telling the story of Cesare Maldini is like leafing through a family album of Italian football. It's not just the story of a great defender or a tracksuit-wearing coach. It's the story of an architect of the ball, a man who crossed the 20th century of football with rare elegance, from captain with the European Cup raised to the Wembley sky to mentor of boys who would become world champions. His life is a novel made of values, sacrifice, and that class which cannot be bought, but is passed down from father to son.

If we try to find an image that represents him, a "tough guy" who breaks opponents' legs doesn't come to mind. A gentleman on the pitch comes to mind, one who stole the ball with intelligence and then, instead of clearing the fear away, caressed it and moved forward. In an era when defenders had a single task—"ball away, better in the stands"—he dared to look forward and build play. In short, he was a defender-fantasista, a living oxymoron who made history.

Tactics: When Class Meets Order

Cesare Maldini's story is a bridge between two centuries. He was there when football was in black and white, and he arrived at the threshold of the third millennium, always with the same, identical philosophy: first you learn to defend, then the rest comes by itself.

- The Defender Who Played Chess (with the Ball): As a player, Cesare wasn't one of those who waited for the opponent to rough him up. He anticipated him with his head, even before his feet. He started as a right-back, moved to the center, and became a refined libero, a deep-lying playmaker. While other defenders only thought about "clearing," he took responsibility for setting up the action, crossing the halfway line, and dictating the tempo.

- His masterpiece is etched in the memory of every Milan fan: the 1963 Wembley final. That day, Cesare didn't just defend. He was the defensive playmaker, the general on the pitch who, on Nereo Rocco's instruction, changed the marking on Eusébio and triggered the Devil's comeback. When he lifted that Cup, he wasn't just winning a trophy; he was drawing the manifesto of a new way of playing football.

- The Coach: "Counter-attack and Go, As the Masters Taught" On the

bench, Cesare Maldini never tried to turn the world upside down. He wasn't a revolutionary like Sacchi, nor an iron sergeant like Capello. He was a traditionalist with his head on his shoulders, one who respected the roots of Italian football but knew he had to adapt them to the kids he had in front of him.

- Defense comes first: His teams always started from there. At the 1998 World Cup, his Italy still used a zonal defense with a libero, a system that seemed old but had been oiled to perfection. It was like having an umbrella when it rains: it didn't make a spectacle, but you never got wet.

- The lethal counter-attack: Once the area was cleared, go! Speed and verticality. A journalist of the time perfectly defined it: "Counter-attack, and goal. As the masters taught." It wasn't boring football, it was clever football, the kind that makes you win matches with intelligence. And with guys like Vieri up front, the script was simple: ball to Christian and he did the rest.

Cesare e Paolo

The Fantasista: The Paternal Heart of a Mentor

If there was one gift Cesare Maldini had, besides tactics, it was the ability to nurture kids. He didn't coach them, he raised them. He took them by the hand, protected them, taught them the trade, and then let them fly.

- The Under-21: The Forge of Champions: For ten years, from 1986 to 1996, Maldini led the Under-21 National team. His haul? Three consecutive European Championships. Guinness World Records stuff.

But the most beautiful result isn't the cups, it's the list of kids he shaped: Totti, Cannavaro, Buffon, Nesta, Del Piero... the entire generation that would lift the World Cup in 2006.

- His secret? Simple but profound: he gave trust. He didn't just teach movements, he taught how to be men. He understood that a talent like Totti needed to feel free, but also protected. And Francesco, from that rebellious kid, became a champion also thanks to him. He was a second father, one who looked you in the eye and made you understand he believed in you.

- The Challenge of the '98 World Cup: Baggio, Del Piero, and the Art of Choosing: At the French World Cup, Cesare found himself with a dream attacking roster: Baggio, Del Piero, Vieri, Inzaghi, Zola. It seemed like a dream, but it was a nightmare for any coach. How to keep everyone happy?

He chose the path of pragmatism. He made the talents coexist in fits and starts, bringing on Baggio and Del Piero one in place of the other. Someone criticized him, but he had his reasons: the team's balance came before everything. It wasn't a lack of esteem, it was responsibility. And Vieri, the only "non-fantasista" of the group, responded with 5 goals in 5 matches. The team worked, even if the hearts of some fans dreamed of seeing more magic on the pitch.

- The Long View: From Pastore to Grandson Daniel: Even after retirement, Cesare never stopped watching football with a keen eye. In 2010, at 78, he spoke of a young Argentine talent: "Pastore is a very good player... I could see him well in a Milan shirt." He still had that rare gift of recognizing talent, of seeing the fantasista even thousands of kilometers away.

- And then, naturally, there is his greatest legacy: the Maldini dynasty. His son Paolo, to whom he transmitted the values of class, discipline, and leadership. Fabio Capello, speaking of them, said a beautiful thing: "They have something different in their DNA." And when his grandson Daniel arrived, Cesare immediately saw traces of the attacking midfielder in him: "touches, quality, dribbling, and vision of play." Perhaps, in Daniel, he saw himself again. That defender-fantasista who had invented a role, projected forward by a few meters, to do what he loved most: play with imagination.

The Philosophy: The Nobility of Italian Football

In the end, what did Cesare Maldini leave us? He left us an idea of football, and perhaps of life.

1. Football is intelligence: It's not just about running, it's about thinking. Reading the game before others is the real talent.

2. Discipline doesn't kill fantasy: On the contrary, it protects it. A fantasista must feel part of a group, and creative freedom is the reward for those who respect the rules.

3. Legacy is passed on by example: The Maldini family is not just a dynasty of champions, it's a school of life. Class, respect, humility. Values that never go out of style.

In conclusion, Cesare Maldini was not just a great defender or a national team coach. He was the guardian of a romantic and noble football. A football made of sacrifice, elegance, and humanity. A football where even the toughest of stoppers could, in his own small way, dream of being a fantasista.

And who knows, watching matches from the sky, he might still smile every time he sees a defender set off with the ball, with a clean face and head held high, just as he taught.

{12} Fabio Capello

Fabio Capello: The Rigor That Liberates Genius

If Vujadin Boškov was the affectionate father who encouraged his children to dream, Fabio Capello is the stern commander who transforms those dreams into concrete victories. He represents the

perfect antithesis of the romantic coach: where Boškov used empathy and humor to liberate creativity, Capello employs discipline and structure to channel it towards a common goal. His vision of the fantasista is not made of sentimentality, but of precise demands, tactical responsibility, a steel pact between genius and the team.

The Tactical Foundations: Order as Religion

Capello's philosophy rests on a non-negotiable principle, a sort of secular commandment: the team comes before everything, and talent must serve the collective. It's not a limitation, it's a conscious liberation: only when every player accepts being part of a cog, can the cog function perfectly.

- The Gospel of 4-4-2: Throughout his career, Capello's preferred system was the 1-4-4-2, a structure that embodies his footballing soul: defensive solidity, surgical balance, and lethal counter-attacking speed. His teams were born with a clear identity: first, don't concede, then strike. As he recently reiterated with his usual lucidity: "Whoever concedes fewer goals wins, not whoever scores more." A phrase that sounds like a programmatic manifesto, a declaration of intent that spanned decades of triumphant football.

- Speed and Verticality: The Horror of Inert Ball: Capello's patience is inversely proportional to boredom. Possession for its own sake bothers him almost like a personal insult. In a December 2022 interview, he carved his thought with definitive words: "Possession, when not supported by speed, becomes cloying and unproductive... You have to manage with speed and by playing vertically."

Here is his concept of creativity revealed: it's not a virtuoso end in

itself, it's not the juggler who enchants only to stop. For Capello, creativity is functional to the quick transition, it's the flash that accelerates the action, it's the vision that turns an organized defense into a highway to the goal. The fantasista must not dance on the spot, he must dance towards the opponent's goal.

- Adaptability within Structure: It would be reductive to pin Capello down to just the 4-4-2. His career demonstrates notable tactical flexibility, but always within an inviolable perimeter: maintaining a solid defensive core. At Roma he used the 1-3-4-2-1, elsewhere the 1-4-2-3-1, but in every formation the priority remained the same: balance and cover.

His famous adaptability should not be misunderstood: it doesn't mean bending the system to the whims of the individual, but finding the best possible placement for each talent within a machine that must win. Players enter Capello's system, not vice versa.

The Vision of the Fantasista: Respect Through Responsibility

Capello's relationship with creatives is a fascinating paradox: no one respects talent more than he does, but no one holds them accountable with such severity. For Capello, genius is not a privilege that exempts one from duties, but an additional responsibility towards the group.

- Totti and Capello: The Compromise That Brought the Scudetto: The case of Francesco Totti at Roma is perhaps the most luminous example of this philosophy applied. Capello built the scudetto-winning team around his captain, but he did it on his own terms. Totti was entrusted with the role of "offensive playmaker" behind the strikers, a position that granted him immense creative freedom, but within a rigid structure where defensive duties were sacred and inviolable.

The system allowed Totti to "unleash his fantasy without tactical limits," but only because the scaffolding around him was reinforced concrete. Freedom was the reward for discipline, not a free concession. And the Scudetto arrived.

- The "Iron Sergeant": Authority as Method: The nickname "iron sergeant" is not a journalistic invention, but the reflection of a personality forged in discipline. Zlatan Ibrahimović, who has character to spare, described him with memorable words: "When he gets angry, few dare to look him in the eye... Capello is not your friend. He doesn't chat with players... He's the iron sergeant."

This distance is not coldness, it's method. Capello knows that

respect is born from clarity, not familiarity. The fantasista must know who's in charge, must know that his expressive freedom is directly proportional to his tactical reliability. There's no room for misunderstandings, no room for protests. There's only the verdict of the pitch.

- Respect for the Game: A recent episode illuminates Capello's ethics like few others. He saw Ademola Lookman sitting on the ball during warm-up and didn't hide his displeasure: "I don't accept it, I can't see players sitting on the ball. It's a lack of respect for the ball."

It seems like a minor comment, but it's a window into the soul. The ball is not an object, it's the symbol of the game, it's what makes magic possible. Respecting it means respecting football, teammates, opponents, the public. For Capello, talent must be accompanied by an almost religious reverence for the game itself.

Modern Fantasisti Through Capello's Eyes (Note: all foreigners!)

His recent forays into technical commentary show us how he evaluates contemporary creatives, what qualities he looks for in them.

- Luka Modrić: The Professor: Capello has repeatedly praised Modrić, calling him "a professor" and emphasizing his superior intelligence: "He has exceptional intelligence; he reads the game in advance and always arrives first."

It's no coincidence that the highest praise concerns reading the game, not dribbling or shooting. For Capello, the intellectual dimension of the fantasista is the decisive one. Technique is a prerequisite, intelligence is what makes the difference between a good player and a champion.

- Soulé vs. Yildiz: Vision of Play: Asked about two young talents, Capello had no hesitation: "Paz excites me. He has vision of play, technical quality from Real Madrid."

The key word is "vision of play." Capello looks for the fantasista who sees what others don't see, who anticipates trajectories, who reads the development of the action before it manifests. It's this prophetic ability that makes a creative truly special.

- Christian Pulisic: Verticality: On Pulisic, Capello appreciated the versatility and the ability to go straight for the goal: "He knows how to move, has quality and speed, and goes vertical."

The ability to play "everywhere" and the vertical drive are exactly

what Capello demands from his creatives. No horizontality for its own sake, no sterile possession, but constant search for depth, for the goal.

- Rafael Leão: Responsible Freedom: Initially skeptical about Leão as a centre-forward, Capello later praised Allegri's work with him: "I saw him looser, freer, and happier. He's fit, both physically and mentally; he communicates with the team and participates in the game. He is at the same time freer and more responsible."

Balance is everything: "freer and more responsible." It's not an oxymoron, it's the perfect synthesis of Capello's philosophy. Freedom is earned through responsibility, it doesn't replace it.

The Central Philosophy: Genius as a Privileged Soldier

Capello summed up his approach with a phrase that should be etched in the memory of every footballer: "My job is to put players in the best conditions to express their potential, but without ever losing sight of the team's balance."

For Capello, the fantasista is not a spoiled artist to be protected, but a privileged soldier: endowed with greater creative freedoms, but bound to the same tactical duties as anyone else. He respects genius, but demands it be channeled through structure. Discipline does not suffocate fantasy, it directs it towards the only goal that counts: victory.

The numbers speak clearly: 4 Scudetti with Milan, 1 with Roma, 2 Ligas with Real Madrid, one Champions League. The Capello method works.

Capello and Boškov: Two Souls Compared

Where Boškov said "We are a democratic team. Everyone can speak. Then I decide," Capello might reply "I decide. Then we execute." Boškov used humor to disarm, Capello uses authority to command. Both won, but their visions of the fantasista reveal opposite temperaments:

- Boškov: the fantasista needs understanding and trust to flourish.

- Capello: the fantasista needs structure and discipline to be useful.

Yet, both would converge on one point: the team must win. The difference lies in how you get there. Boškov built bridges, Capello draws straight lines. Both lead to the destination.

{13} Zdeněk Zeman

Zdeněk Zeman: The Last Poet of Football, the Libertarian Who Liberated Geniuses

Let's talk about Zdeněk Zeman. That is: the Bohemian with his ever-lit cigar, the anarchist of the ball, that crazy visionary who looked Italian catenaccio straight in the eye and told it with a mocking smile: "No thanks, I prefer to lose 5-4 than win 1-0." You don't meet someone like that every day. Either you love him with all your heart, or you hate him with the same intensity. There's no middle ground, because he himself was never in the middle.

If Carlo Mazzone was the dad who protected his lads under his cloak, Zeman was the revolutionary who put the knife between his fantasisti's teeth and pushed them down the mountain shouting: "Fly, damn you! Show me you're truly geniuses!" His relationship with the number 10s? A complicated, turbulent love story, but one of those that marks you forever, that changes your life and your way of seeing football.

The Philosophy: Attack as the Sole, Inarguable Religion

To understand Zeman and his relationship with fantasisti, you first have to get into his head and his heart. Because Zeman doesn't just coach: he preaches. His football isn't a job, it's a mission. A crusade against boredom, against conservatism, against everything that is horizontal and sterile.

His idea of play rests on four fundamental pillars, four commandments carved in stone:

- The 4-3-3 as Gospel: His formation is always, unfailingly, 4-3-3. But don't call it a "scheme." It's a religious creed. He once said a phrase that paints him whole: "I don't understand coaches who change three or four systems in a season. After forty years, I still struggle to make this one work." Stubborn? Maybe. Consistent? Absolutely, to the core.

- The Goal as the Sole Purpose of Life: His philosophy is summed up in one of the most famous and revolutionary phrases in Italian football: "If you score 90 goals, you shouldn't worry too much about how many you concede." It's not recklessness, it's absolute faith in the power of your own game. His 1997-98 Roma is the perfect photograph of this idea: 67 goals scored (league record), 42 conceded (the worst among the big teams). Pure spectacle, guaranteed thrill, Zemanlandia in all its glory.

- Pressing as Insatiable Hunger: His teams play at a hundred miles an hour. No pause, no breath. Very high, suffocating, constant pressing. Defenders push up, attackers press like possessed, full-backs become extra wingers. On goal kicks, his teams would line up in an incredible 2-0-8 formation: two behind and eight on the halfway line, ready to

sprint like arrows towards the opponent's goal. Simple, elementary, devastating math: the more people you have in the box, the more goals you score.

- Verticality as the Only Possible Direction: Horizontal passes? Useless. Sterile. Almost a mortal sin. As Michael Bradley, his midfielder at Roma, explained: "He wants that when the team has the ball, it goes forward without useless possession, or backward passes that don't help." Every action must have a meaning, must go towards the opponent's goal, straight, without useless detours.

The Fantasista in the Perfect Machine: Free Inside the Mechanism

And here we come to the heart of the matter. Zeman's system is a crazy centrifuge: players run like mad, they do stadium stairs until they drop dead on their feet. How does a delicate artist, a creative genius, fit into this infernal machine?

The answer is beautiful and complicated at the same time.

- Francesco Totti: The Absolute Masterpiece: The best case, the perfect example, is that of Francesco Totti at Roma in the 1997-98 season. Zeman arrives, looks at this twenty-year-old with eyes shining, and does something crazy: he gives him the number 10 shirt and total freedom. Then, with that intellectual honesty that distinguishes him, he will say: "Francesco is the strongest player I have ever coached. It's not about goals or assists—it's the vision, the technique, that makes him superior to everyone else."

In his 4-3-3, Totti was the master of the advanced department, with license to roam, drop deep, find spaces, and exploit them. While Balbo was the pure striker and the right winger worked the flank, Totti was free to express his fantasy. Zeman, with extraordinary foresight, anticipated everything: "For me, he can also play centre-forward," he said, ten years before Totti became that false nine who would enchant the world.

- Giuseppe Signori: The Transformation of a Talent: Before Totti, there was Giuseppe Signori at Foggia. Zeman took a left winger with a deadly shot and turned him into an atypical centre-forward. Not a static bomber, but an attacker in perpetual motion, who dropped deep to receive the ball, opened spaces for the wingers and mezzali to run into, and then sprinted into the box to finish. Signori wasn't a classic fantasista, but Zeman made him a perfect goal machine, capable of winning three top-scorer titles.

- Midfielders as Tireless Engines: Players like Eusebio Di Francesco and Damiano Tommasi became, under his guidance, true box-to-box engines. They ran, pressed, recovered, made runs. They were the fuel that made the machine work, the engine that allowed the fantasisti to fly.

- Pescara 2011-12: The New Generation: At Pescara, Zeman once again demonstrated his ability to read talent. His fantasisti were not classic attacking midfielders, but modern talents with different characteristics: Lorenzo Insigne was a quick, darting winger, Ciro Immobile a breakthrough striker, Marco Verratti a deep-lying playmaker with infinite vision. Zeman adapted, because for him the important thing was that the players had talent and the will to run.

- Pavel Nedvěd: The Discoverer of Champions: And let's not forget Pavel Nedvěd. It was Zeman, his compatriot, who brought him to Italy and launched him into big-time football. He saw in him the prototype of his ideal midfielder: a "box-to-box" of infinite quality, capable of running for ninety minutes and making the difference in both phases. From that semi-unknown kid, Nedvěd became a Ballon d'Or winner.

The Paradox: Totti Flies, De Rossi Sinks

And here we come to the most fascinating contradiction of Zeman's creed. In the same Roma where Totti performed miracles, Daniele De Rossi struggled terribly. The analyses of the time say clearly: "De Rossi doesn't fit into Zeman's tactical mechanisms." He saw himself as a playmaker, Zeman saw him as an interior to be made to run and press.

Moral of the story: not all fantasisti are equal in the Bohemian's eyes. His approach is ruthless in its honesty: "If you're a genius like Totti, do whatever the hell you want. The others adapt to the machine. Period."

Artist or Jailer? The Double Soul of a Genius

Here's the beauty of Zeman, the reason why he's unique and unrepeatable: he's two people in one, and both are authentic.

On one hand, there's the romantic idealist, the poet who speaks with shining eyes of the Danubian school, of Matthias Sindelar nicknamed "the Mozart of football," of the game as art and spectacle. His imprint is so profound that "Zemanlandia" ended up in the Treccani Encyclopedia, defined as an "imaginative and attack-oriented system of play."

On the other hand, there's the brutal jailer, the sergeant who subjects his players to legendary retreats and training sessions for intensity and harshness. Players, it was said, "barely survived. He demanded non-stop running, suffocating pressing, immediate verticality. Those who couldn't handle it were discarded without pity."

Arrigo Sacchi, who knows about revolutions, said of him: "His teams have a style in a country where few things have a style... He tried to win through merit and superiority."

Giuseppe Signori added a detail that says it all: "There were only two things he couldn't stand: someone passing the ball back or going towards the corner flag."

The Final Verdict: Does Zeman Help or Destroy Fantasisti?

So, after all this, what's the verdict? Is Zeman heaven or hell for a fantasista?

- Yes, if you're an absolute genius. Totti always considered him one of the most important coaches of his career. Zeman gave him the stage, the trust, the freedom to be himself, and in return only asked him to become stronger, fiercer, more decisive.

- Yes, if you're a creative with lungs like bellows. Insigne, Immobile, Verratti exploded with him because they had talent to spare and an extraordinary willingness to run.

- No, if you're a classic, static attacking midfielder. The one who waits for the ball, seeks the pause, doesn't run or press. In Zeman's football, there is literally no space for those who don't move. It's too fast, too vertical, too tiring.

Zeman once said a phrase that encapsulates the meaning of his entire career: "There are many coaches today who manage, without trying to improve players. Then there are a few coaches who build players. I feel I am one of those few."

And it's the pure truth. He didn't just use fantasisti, he built them. He shaped them with his hands, demanded they become more than they were. Totti became Totti also thanks to him. Signori became a goal machine. Verratti became a world-class playmaker. Nedvěd a Ballon d'Or winner.

But he also broke, inexorably, those who couldn't handle his infernal

rhythm. De Rossi struggled, others collapsed under the weight of those repetitions.

In the end, Zdeněk Zeman's relationship with the fantasista is exactly like everything he's done in life: extreme, passionate, without half measures, without compromises. A paradise for a chosen few, a hell for all the others.

And anyway, always and forever, gloriously unforgettable. Because with Zeman, whether you were Totti or a poor soul who couldn't take it anymore, you knew you had encountered something real. Something pure. Something crazy. Something wonderful.

As that famous song dedicated to him and his Foggia goes: "Because you never change." Thankfully. For the joy of those who love true football.

{14} Marcello Lippi

Marcello Lippi: The Alchemist Who Transformed Champions into Winners

In the great theater of Italian football, Marcello Lippi played a role that no one else was able to interpret with his elegance. He wasn't the revolutionary like Sacchi, nor the iron sergeant like Capello, nor the anarchic poet like Zeman. Lippi was something rarer and perhaps more fascinating: the tightrope walker, the architect of souls, the man who knew how to tailor a suit for his fantasisti, made of discipline and

freedom, rigor and fantasy.

His career is a collection of masterpieces: five Scudetti with Juventus, a Champions League, an Intercontinental Cup, and that jewel forever set in history, the World Cup won with Italy in 2006. But beyond the trophies, Lippi left an even more precious legacy: a way of understanding football and, above all, the relationship with those special players we call fantasisti.

Tactics: The Subtle Art of Balance

If there's one word that encapsulates Lippi's tactical thought, that word is balance. Not the static and boring balance of those afraid to lose, but the dynamic balance of one who knows the team must be a living organism, capable of adapting, breathing, changing its skin depending on the moment.

- Fluidity as a Trademark: At Juventus, Lippi never chained himself to a fixed formation. His 4-3-3 was an elastic structure, capable of transforming during the match into 4-4-2, into 3-4-3, into a tactical kaleidoscope that confused opponents and freed his players. Players had defined roles, certainly, but within those roles they enjoyed a freedom of movement and interpretation that few coaches know how to grant.

- Lippi's attack was never an end in itself. As emerges from analyses of his offensive strategy, "Lippi believed that the attack should be flexible, situational, and deeply connected to the overall balance of the team." It wasn't about accumulating possession or overloading the opponent's box, but about striking with intelligence at the right moment, creating high-quality chances by exploiting the spaces that opened up.

- The Transition: The Moment of Truth: One of the most fascinating aspects of Lippi's football was the lethal ability to strike in transition. His teams were most dangerous in the exact moment they won the ball back: the watchword was immediate verticality, speed, surprise. Midfielders immediately looked for the through ball, attackers sprinted behind the defenders like arrows shot from a bow. These lightning-fast counter-attacks, prepared during the week with meticulous care, caught opponents out of position and generated clear-cut chances.

- Intelligence in Movement: Lippi placed capital importance on the intelligent movement of his attackers. More than elaborate pre-defined patterns, he encouraged quick combinations, positional exchanges, rotations that confused marking and opened up gaps. Attackers had to know how to read teammates' movements in real-time, create sudden

passing lanes, drag defenders out of position with feints and counter-feints. This made his offensive play unpredictable, almost impossible for opponents to decipher.

- The Team as a Mosaic: His vision of the collective was almost artistic, worthy of a Renaissance painter. He considered the team a mosaic, where every small tile, however modest, contributed to creating an image larger and more beautiful than the sum of the individual parts. This meant that sometimes even players of extraordinary talent could be left out if they weren't functional to the overall design. But when the mosaic was complete, when all the tiles found their right place, the result was simply perfect.

The Treatment of the Fantasista: Freedom within Structure

And we arrive at the pulsating heart of the matter: how did Lippi treat fantasisti? The answer is complex, multifaceted, fascinating as a prism. Because his relationship with creative geniuses was intense, profound, fruitful, and sometimes even controversial.

- Alessandro Del Piero: The Absolute Masterpiece: The most emblematic case, the living manifesto of Lippi's philosophy, is undoubtedly that of Alessandro Del Piero at Juventus. Lippi took a

young man of extraordinary talent, still unripe, and shaped him into one of the greatest players in Italian history. In his system, Del Piero had absolute freedom to roam across the entire offensive front: he often started from the left in the 4-3-3, but would constantly cut inside to look for his legendary curled shot, to invent, to create, to decide.

Lippi built the team around him with surgical intelligence, flanking him with attackers like Vialli, Ravanelli, then Inzaghi and Trezeguet, who guaranteed the necessary physical support, movement in depth, and finishing ability. Del Piero could thus dedicate himself to his art, knowing that behind him was a perfect machine that allowed him to express himself fully. It was the perfect synthesis: genius and structure embracing.

- Zinedine Zidane: The Silent Orchestrator: With Zinedine Zidane, Lippi signed another masterpiece of technical and human direction. He took the French genius, silent and immense, and placed him at the center of his project, giving him the keys to the midfield but inserting him into a structure where even he, the absolute champion, had to contribute to the non-possession phase. Zidane was the orchestrator, the conductor who made the team turn with elegant movements and illuminating passes, but he did it within a system where midfielders like Conte and Deschamps cleaned up for him, acted as his shield, guaranteed him the necessary cover to invent.

Lippi's Juventus with Zidane was perhaps the maximum expression of this philosophy: genius and discipline coexisted in perfect harmony, they nourished each other, they exalted each other.

- Francesco Totti and the World Cup Dilemma: And then there's the most discussed, most controversial, most fascinating chapter of all: that of the 2006 World Cup. Did Lippi leave Francesco Totti at home? No, he took him to Germany, but in a different version, transformed, almost unrecognizable to those used to Totti free to create at Roma. Totti was no longer the pure fantasista, but had been reinvented as a central attacking midfielder in a 4-3-1-2 that gave him freedom to invent but also asked him to sacrifice, to cover, to work for the team. And it worked. Italy won the World Cup and Totti contributed his part, demonstrating that even genius can bend to the needs of the collective without losing its essence.

- But the real storm broke four years later, when Lippi, in his return to the Azzurri bench for the 2010 World Cup, completely excluded the fantasisti from his list: no Totti, no Del Piero, no Cassano. A choice that sparked an uproar in Italy, divided critics and fans, and raised a

cloud of controversy.

The Philosophy of the "Pentolone" (The Big Pot)

Why did Lippi make such a radical choice? The answer lies in his deepest philosophy. He saw the National team as a "pentolone" —a famous expression of his—into which all the chosen ones had to pour their talents and tactical prerogatives, to allow for different solutions depending on the opponents. But in 2010, evidently, he deemed the available fantasisti not functional to the group's balance, that their presence could disturb that delicate harmony he was trying to build.

His most famous and controversial phrase was: "Italy with a fantasista had never won anything." A statement that sparked debate, that seemed almost a provocation, but had to be contextualized in his thought. Lippi meant that victory couldn't be based on the individual, on a player's flair, but had to be the result of the collective, of organization, of the group. And deep down, the Italy of 2006 had won with Totti, yes, but also with Grosso, Materazzi, Gattuso, that is, with players who had sacrificed their individual talent for the common good. The fantasista was part of the mosaic, an important tile, but not the entire mosaic.

Selection as an Act of Responsibility

Lippi always defended his choices with granite consistency: "I am absolutely convinced that there are no phenomena I left at home." For him, selection was not an act of whim or caprice, but an act of responsibility towards the group. The excluded players, however talented, however loved by the public, would have had the same problems as those called up if inserted into a context that didn't exalt them, that didn't put them in a position to express themselves fully. It was better to leave them out than to risk extinguishing them.

The Legacy: The Disciples and the Philosophy That Lives in Time

Lippi's greatness is also measured by the players he coached who in turn became great coaches: Antonio Conte, Didier Deschamps, Zinedine Zidane. They all inherited something from the master: the ability to build cohesive groups, maniacal attention to detail, tactical flexibility, the ability to adapt the system to the available players.

When we look at Conte's Chelsea, or Deschamps' World Cup-winning France, or Zidane's Real Madrid winning three consecutive Champions Leagues, we see echoes of Lippi's thought: organized but not rigid teams, capable of suffering and striking, where individual talent is

always put at the service of the collective. It's the most beautiful legacy, the one that continues to live and bear fruit.

The Final Verdict: The Tightrope Walker Who Won Everything

So, after this journey into his philosophy and his relationship with fantasisti, what is the verdict on Marcello Lippi?

Lippi was neither a "friend" nor an "enemy" of the fantasista. He never had prejudices, in either sense. He was something rarer and more precious: an architect who knew exactly where to place genius in his construction, like a master glassmaker who knows where to put the most precious stone so that the whole window shines with the right light.

When genius was functional to the overall design, he put him at the center and built everything around him, as he did with Del Piero and Zidane. When he felt it could disturb the balance, that its presence risked breaking the harmony of the mosaic, he left him out without hesitation, even at the cost of seeming ruthless, even at the cost of facing a hurricane of controversy.

His approach can be summed up in a few fundamental points, carved in the stone of his career:

1. The fantasista must serve the team, not vice versa. Talent is a wonderful gift, but it becomes truly precious only when it is put at the service of the collective, when it accepts being part of something bigger.

2. Freedom is earned through tactical intelligence. His geniuses could invent, create, amaze, but they had to understand when and how to do it, they had to fit into the team's mechanisms without disrupting them.

3. The group comes before everything. There are no untouchables, no phenomena above the rules. Even the greatest champion can be sacrificed if his presence risks breaking the harmony of the mosaic.

4. Victory is the only parameter that counts. And Lippi won everywhere, in every way, in Italy and the world, with Juventus and the National team, demonstrating that his formula, whether discussed or celebrated, worked.

In conclusion, Marcello Lippi was the great balancer of Italian football. The one who knew how to hold together the defensive rigor of tradition

and the fantasy of the number 10s, the iron discipline of the group and the creative flair of the individual. He was never afraid to choose, and his choices, contested or applauded, discussed or praised, were always motivated by an unshakeable inner consistency: to build a team that could win.

For this, in the pantheon of great coaches who shaped our way of seeing and loving football, Lippi deserves a special place of honor. Not as the most revolutionary, not as the most romantic, not as the most spectacular. But as the most complete. The man who demonstrated, once and for all, that genius and rigor can not only coexist, but exalt each other. And that when this happens, when discipline meets fantasy, football ceases to be just sport and becomes art.

{15} Carlo Ancelotti

Carlo Ancelotti's Tactical Philosophy and His Relationship with Fantasisti in Serie A

The Core Ideas Reframed

- The Tactical Puzzle Solver: When he arrived at Milan in 2001, Ancelotti's main challenge wasn't simply to teach a pattern, but to architect a system to coexist with an overabundance of elite "number tens." He inherited a group with Rui Costa, Rivaldo, Seedorf, and a young Pirlo. Instead of imposing his initial creed (a rigid 4-4-2), he demonstrated rare flexibility: he invented solutions like the Christmas Tree (4-3-2-1) to accommodate two attacking midfielders and, above all, revolutionized the role of the playmaker by moving Pirlo deeper. His tactics weren't a dogma, but a suit tailored for his jewels.

- The Birth of the Modern Playmaker: Ancelotti's masterstroke was the transformation of Andrea Pirlo. A struggling attacking midfielder, lacking space, was moved back in front of the defense. This move solved a problem of abundance and created a tactical archetype destined to become a school. Protected by a mastiff like Gattuso, Pirlo had the time and vision to orchestrate play, while Kaká and Seedorf received total freedom in the attacking third. Ancelotti created a

stratification of talents: the playmaker thought from afar, the fantasista struck up close.

- A Player-Centric Philosophy: Ancelotti's approach is defined by empowerment, not dogmatism. He broke with the Italian tradition of the "system" prevailing over the individual, stating that tactics depend "on the will of the players." He understands that the fantasista has a different rhythm, made of pauses and sudden bursts, and that his brilliance requires a solid defensive structure behind him to express itself without guilt.

- The Legacy of this Vision: This humanistic management had a profound impact on the tactical evolution of Italian football. Ancelotti's Milan demonstrated that solidity and fantasy could coexist, that the "mastiff" (Gattuso) and the "poet" (Pirlo) were complementary, not alternatives. For subsequent Italian fantasisti – from Totti to Del Piero, down to players like the young Cassano – Ancelotti's example offered hope: there was a way to win that didn't require sacrificing one's identity.

In the Dressing Room: Ancelotti's Pre-match Speech to His Fantasista

(The stadium roars outside, the noise muffled by concrete walls. The air smells of liniment and cut grass. Carlo Ancelotti, calm and composed, takes his attacking midfielder aside. He doesn't wave a whiteboard, doesn't shout instructions. He puts a hand on his shoulder and smiles.)

He would never speak in rigid patterns. He would focus on freedom, intelligence, and trust. Here's how that conversation might go.

"Listen, I know what they've been telling you all week. 'Close down spaces.' 'Help out in defense.' 'Help the full-back.' They want to turn you into a little soldier. But I didn't put you in this team to be a soldier. I put you in this team because you see passes that I don't see. And I've been chewing on football for thirty years." (He taps his temple)

"The game is simple for you, isn't it? You feel it here, before it happens. That's a gift. My job is to make sure you have the freedom to use this gift. When you receive the ball, I don't want you to think about defense or your positioning. I want you to think about how you're going to humiliate the guy in front of you."

"See that space between their midfield and defense? It's small, four or five meters. For them, it's a trap. For you, it's your living room. Go there, plant yourself. If they follow you, good—you've taken them out of position and created havoc. If they don't follow you, even better. Turn, face the goal, and make them pay." (His tone becomes more pragmatic)

"Now, you know me. I don't shout if you lose the ball trying something beautiful. But I won't protect you from the other ten on the pitch either. You have a brain, use it. There will be moments when we don't have the ball—five, ten minutes—when they're pushing. In those moments, I need you to be clever. Drop a bit. Let us play. Pass it to Pirlo, let him find the rhythm. Save your energy for when it really counts."

"You're not here just to play. You're here to decide. The scheme? The scheme is just a drawing. You are the painting. Without you, it's just lines on a blank sheet. So go out there, look for the ball, and be the player God intended you to be. The rest—the running, the fighting—we leave to the others. You? You're here to create the magic." (He gives him one last pat on the shoulder.)

"Go on, go. Show them what a real fantasista is."

The Gift of Carlo Ancelotti to World Football

Carlo Ancelotti's legacy to international football is a legacy so rich and multifaceted that it certainly cannot be contained within a trophy cabinet. As much as his overflowing cabinet of cups speaks for itself, his most precious contribution to the game is another: having demonstrated, once and for all, that empathy, adaptability, and a profoundly human approach are not only compatible with winning at

the highest levels, but represent the most authentic and lasting formula for it. In an era when football risks suffocating under the weight of data and pre-set systems, Ancelotti has given the world a timeless lesson in silent leadership and tactical fluidity.

Here are the fundamental pillars of this extraordinary gift.

- The Perfect Adapter: A tactical chameleon, capable of building the system around his champions, demonstrating that flexibility, not dogma, is the key to winning everywhere and in any footballing culture. The only coach to have won the league in England, Italy, Spain, Germany, and France. Creator of the "Christmas Tree" (4-3-2-1) at Milan and the deep-lying playmaker role for Pirlo.

- The Silent Leader: A pioneer of person-centric management, capable of creating not simply teams, but real families. He treats champions first as men, giving them the serenity to express their talent. Affectionately nicknamed "Papa Carlo." Champions like Ibra, Beckham, and Ronaldo have always praised his personal touch and the unique atmosphere he creates.

- The Liberator of Talent: He has demonstrated that order and fantasy can coexist perfectly. He builds tactical cages that become launching pads for the "fantasisti," proving that defensive solidity does not require the sacrifice of brilliance. He has exalted generations of number tens, from Kaká and Pirlo to Vinícius Jr. and Jude Bellingham, building systems designed to amplify their flair, not to bridle it.

- The Master of Modern Football: His unique blend of tactical intuition, group management, and unprecedented success has created a new archetype of global coach. Holder of the record for 5 UEFA Champions League titles won as a coach. His appointment in 2025 to lead Brazil, the first foreigner in the history of the Seleção, is an epochal event uniting two worlds.

The Perfect Adapter: A Tactician Without Borders

Ancelotti's greatest gift to international football is having demonstrated that tactical rigidity is a limit, not a strength. In an age of system ideologues, he is a pragmatist. He is the only coach in history to have won the title in each of the five major European leagues. An achievement that is not the result of chance, but the logical consequence of an unparalleled philosophical flexibility.

His secret? He never arrives at a new club with a system already carved in stone, demanding that players adapt. On the contrary, he studies the squad's strengths and tailors the tactical suit to them. At Milan, faced with the embarrassment of riches of four number tens, he invented the Christmas Tree and reinvented Pirlo as a playmaker in front of the defense. At Real Madrid, he transitioned seamlessly from the hyper-fast 4-3-3 of CR7, Bale, and Benzema to a system capable of exalting new phenomena like Vinícius Jr. and Bellingham. This ability to be reborn and reinvent himself is a teaching that has become a school of thought, influencing an entire generation of coaches.

The Silent Leader: A Human Revolution

His perhaps most influential legacy is his pioneering approach to leadership, a person-centric method. In the climate of pressure and

hypertrophic egos of top-level football, Ancelotti's recipe is of a disarming simplicity: treat footballers as human beings. He creates a family atmosphere, earning the nickname "Papa Carlo." He believes in the carrot and the stick, but with a clear preference for the former, giving his lads a serene environment in which to feel respected and valued.

This is not a weakness, but a winning strategy. As David Beckham recounted, if Sir Alex Ferguson commanded respect, "Carlo earned it automatically." Zlatan Ibrahimović, certainly not easy to please, elected him his favorite coach precisely for the personal bond he was able to create. Ancelotti demolished the stereotype of the shouting, authoritarian coach, giving the world proof that you can be a gentleman and, at the same time, the King of Cups.

The Liberator of Talent: A Philosophy of Empowerment

Ancelotti's tactical system should be read as a cage that liberates. His cardinal principle is to field players in their ideal role and grant them the freedom to express themselves within a clear structure. His creed is famous: "A footballer must feel at ease on the pitch, in his natural role, and not be a victim of tactics. The offensive phase depends on creativity."

This philosophy has been a gift to fantasisti all over the world. From his early days with the stars at Parma to today's Real Madrid, he has demonstrated a superb art in getting champions to agree and making them work with a smile. He gave Cristiano Ronaldo the license to think only about goals, moved Di María to midfield just to have him in the squad, and today offers Vinícius Jr. the stage to become a decisive champion. His greatest merit? Having demonstrated that defensive organization and individual fantasy are not enemies, but allies.

The Master of Modern Football: A Project for Global Success

When we talk about Ancelotti's gift to international football, we talk about a complete model for success in the modern era. He is one of only seven men to have won the European Cup/Champions League both as a player and as a coach. And as a coach, his record of five Champions League wins is an absolute record, the certification of his mastery on the most prestigious and complex stage in the world.

His career is a case study of winning internationality, the symbol of a "transnational football citizen" whose adaptability reflects broader cultural processes. This legacy found its crowning moment in a historic turning point: his appointment in 2025 to lead the Brazilian national

team. The first foreigner in the history of the Seleção, Ancelotti himself becomes a gift to world football. He is a bridge built between two cultures, called upon to merge his winning "European" formula with Brazil's irrepressible talent. A challenge that represents yet another, extraordinary testimony to his lasting impact on the most beautiful game in the world.

{16} Roberto Mancini

Roberto Mancini: The Architect of Fantasy and His Love for Champions

There is a red thread that inextricably binds Roberto Mancini to the purest concept of football talent. It's a bond you don't learn from books, you don't study on the blackboard, but you carry inside, carved into the soul of one who has lived that talent on their own skin. Because Mancini, before becoming one of the most winning and visionary coaches in Italian football, was himself the embodiment of the number ten: an artist of the ball, elegant and lethal, a silent but trascinante leader, symbol of an era and a team, that Sampdoria, which challenged the world with the power of fantasy.

Today, in his tracksuit, his creed has remained intact, indeed it has become deeper, more aware. His tactical philosophy is a hymn to the beauty of the game, a journey that starts from the mind, bubbling with ideas, of a former champion and goes straight to the heart of his lads. For Mancini, talent is not an encumbrance to be tamed, but a flame to be fed. Here are the pillars of this luminous thought.

- The Principle: Talent as the Cornerstone: His experience as a champion shapes a unique vision: pure quality is not an option, but the very foundation on which to build a winning team. He creates a protective embrace around his creatives, giving them the serenity to dare the impossible. As a player, standard-bearer of Sampdoria. As a coach, he restored centrality and trust to Insigne, building the entire Azzurri maneuver around his plays. His battle for young talents like Pafundi is born from this unshakeable faith.

- Description: The Architect of Tailor-Made Systems: Far from any dogmatism, Mancini "sews" the formation onto the characteristics of his interpreters, selecting the most precious "fabrics" of the league to create a unique tactical suit. A pragmatist with artistic sensibility. At Inter, he modifies his creed to exalt Ibra and Stankovic. With the National team, he works a miracle: he sews together Atalanta's aggression, Inter's insertions, and Napoli's passing to gift Italy a memorable identity.

- Key Examples and Impact: Harmony Between Dream and Concreteness: Don't be fooled by the elegance. In Mancini, the Italian school is rooted in the soul. "Playing well is how titles arrive," he repeats, but he knows that beauty flourishes only on solid and compact foundations. His record-breaking Inter rested on an iron midfield and personality. His magnificent European Championship-winning Italy would never have lifted the trophy without Barella's sublime sacrifice and the tactical order of the entire collective.

- The Revolution of Width: One of his greatest merits, almost an act of cultural courage: he challenged and broke down the Italian prejudice against wingers. He understood that to liberate fantasisti, they needed space to breathe, they needed the field. Width became freedom. He restored dignity and centrality to pure wingers like Berardi and Chiesa, turning them into lethal weapons. His 4-3-3 transforms into a fluid and unpredictable 3-4-2-1, a kaleidoscope of movements and exchanges.

The Soul of the Champion: A Matter of Authentic DNA

To fully understand the greatness of Mancini the coach, you have to have seen him dance on football pitches with the captain's armband on his arm. His relationship with number tens is not professional, it's visceral, because he was one of them. At Sampdoria, he was much more than a player: he was the soul of an epic challenge to the giants of football, the symbol of an enterprise. One president, Paolo Mantovani, went so far as to say: "If Mancini doesn't play, I don't go to the stadium." That unconditional trust, that enveloping warmth, Mancini returned multiplied to his players.

His gospel is disarmingly simple: if you have authentic talent, you put it at the center of your universe. He did it with the National team with Lorenzo Insigne, for years considered a rough diamond difficult to place. While other coaches tried to bridle him in predictable patterns, Mancini performed an act of love: he widened the field, gave him the freedom to cut inside and invent, built an Italy tailor-made to exalt his magical left foot and his vision of play. It was the highest form of respect between artists.

And this same light is found in his words, almost moved, on Simone Pafundi: "For me, it's inexplicable that he doesn't play in Serie A. He has exceptional qualities. He must be allowed to make mistakes, it's a fundamental part of the path." In this phrase is the sum of his thought: talent must be protected like a son, put in a position to express itself and, above all, must be recognized the sacred right to make mistakes. Because without error, there is no growth. Without growth, talent dies.

The "Tailor" and His Perfect Stitching

Mancini has never been a dogmatist, and this is his greatest strength. His rarest gift is the ability to read the raw material at his disposal and build a custom-made system, with the precision and art of a great tailor. Luigi Garlando, in the pages of the Gazzetta, immortalized him with a perfect definition: "The tailor of Serie A." For the Italy that would enchant Europe in 2021, he performed an authentic magic: he took the most precious fabrics of our league and stitched them together with mastery. He took the aggression of Atalanta's defense, the drive of Juve and Milan's wide players, the lethal insertions of Barella (learned at Inter), and the velvety passing of Napoli and Sassuolo.

This flexibility, this liquid intelligence, is his indelible trademark. At Lazio, in a very complicated context, he managed to build a solid and fierce team that gave the fans a memorable Coppa Italia. At Inter, he started with a 4-4-2, but had the humility and lucidity to understand that to exalt absolute geniuses like Ibrahimović and Stankovic, he had to change his skin, switching to a 4-3-1-2 that handed them the keys to the kingdom. It's not easy for a coach to set aside his own creed. For Mancini, it's natural: the team comes before everything, and the team is its champions.

The Silent Revolution: Giving Space Back to Fantasy

Perhaps, Mancini's greatest merit was cultural. He had the courage to challenge and win one of the most deeply rooted and sterile prejudices of Italian football: the idea that wingers were a luxury, players too lightweight for the defensive phase, and therefore expendable. He, with his vision, understood that the exact opposite was true. To liberate the fantasisti, to give them air to breathe, they needed width. They needed men like Spinazzola, capable of stretching opposing defenses like rubber bands, creating those prairies where Insigne could dart in and strike with his curling shot.

His 4-3-3, in possession, became a fluid, unpredictable 3-4-2-1, with wingers high and mezzali launched into the spaces. It was offensive, dominant football that had broken the patterns and fears of an entire football school. Berardi, Chiesa, Insigne: players who in other contexts and under other guides might have remained on the margins, under his wing became the absolute protagonists of the most beautiful rebirth in Azzurri history.

The Harmony Between Dream and Reality

Let's not be enchanted only by his elegance. Behind the figure of "Mancio" the artist, lies a man of the field who made the Italian school his foundation. The pillar of his thought has always been balance. While loving spectacular football, his priority has always been the solidity of the group. "Playing well is how titles arrive," he loves to repeat. And to play well, to express beauty, you need a team that stands on the pitch with intelligence, compactness, and spirit of sacrifice.

His triumphs at Inter arrived when he built an iron midfield, made of warriors and leaders like Cambiasso, Zanetti, and Vieira. His spectacular Italy, the one that made an entire nation dream, would never have won the European Championship without Barella's unseen work and surgical insertions, without an orderly and fierce non-

possession phase. And there's an anecdote worth more than a thousand treatises: he himself, as a player, asked Eriksson to drop back into midfield to give balance to the team. With that act of humility and intelligence, he won a scudetto at Lazio. A gesture that tells of his greatness: the team, the group, harmony, always come before everything.

In conclusion, Roberto Mancini has given Italian football an eternal and precious lesson: fantasy and solidity are not enemies, but kindred spirits. His greatest legacy, the one that will remain forever in the hearts of fans, is having demonstrated that you can win by playing well, indeed very well, and that the highest way to honor the talent of a fantasista is not to bridle him in rigid and codified patterns. The highest way is to build around him an intelligent team, a community of free men, capable of giving him the freedom to express his art without ever forgetting the sweat and sacrifice for the shirt he wears.

{17} Massimiliano Allegri

Massimiliano Allegri: The Realist with a Heart and His Beautiful Relationship with Number Tens

Let's sit down and talk a bit about Massimiliano Allegri. Because he's one of those coaches that, as soon as you say his name, the debate immediately starts. There are those who love him, those who criticize him, but one thing is certain: he's won a lot, an awful lot of football matches. Six scudetti (four with Juve and two with Milan) aren't won by chance. Yet, there's always someone ready to say that his teams "don't play well." But are we sure it's that simple? And then, how does he handle the fantasisti, those players who are part artists, part

magicians, who make the public dream?

The truth is much more fascinating than it seems. Because Allegri, under that somewhat grumpy air, hides a rare intelligence and a relationship with talent much deeper than is believed. Let's go discover it together.

The Pillars of His Thought (In Simple Words)

- The Idea: A Genius Who Solves Problems: He's not fixated on just one formation. He's like a good mechanic: he looks at the engine he has available and finds the best way to make it run, even if he has to invent something strange. At Juve, down a goal against Tottenham, he brought on a defender and turned the match around. At Milan, with all the injuries, he's getting people to play in new roles and the team is flying anyway.

- Don't Concede First: For him, defense is not a boring obsession, but the foundations of the house. If you don't concede, you're always in the game. And then, as he says, if you defend well, you counter-attack better. His Milan has the second-best defense in the league. It's no coincidence: he works a lot on this, but always thinking about how to restart quickly.

- Talent Must Be Intelligent: Here's the key point: Allegri loves fantasisti, but demands they use their heads. He doesn't want players who do nutmegs and tricks for their own sake, but champions who understand when it's time to turn on the light and when instead it's time to roll up their sleeves. He put Modric in front of the defense and everyone said: "What, you're wasting a player like that?" Instead, Modric today is second in Serie A for interceptions. Because Allegri understood that his intelligence was perfect there.

- A Milan with Two Souls: Today's team is a mirror of Allegri: it has a "hard" soul, solid, that never gives up, and a "beautiful" soul, made of champions like Leao, Rabiot, and Pulisic. And guess what? They get along great. The Gazzetta talks about "two souls" coexisting perfectly. And the numbers say that Milan is the team that has created the most goal-scoring opportunities. Not bad for someone who "plays badly," eh?

The Engineer: Tactics? It's a Problem to Solve, Not a Religion

Allegri's most beautiful gift? He's never been a dogmatist. He doesn't have his "tiki-taka" or his "gegenpressing" to teach by heart. For him, every match is a puzzle, and he has to find the solution with what he has at that moment. A bit like when you're at home and have to make dinner with what you find in the fridge: sometimes an incredible dish comes out even if you didn't have the recipe at hand.

Who among us doesn't remember that Juve Champions League match against Tottenham? They were losing, and instead of putting on a striker, he brought on a defender, Lichtsteiner. Everyone thought: "Has he gone crazy?" And instead, in seven minutes, they overturned the result. Not witchcraft, it's that he sees things others don't see.

Today at Milan, he's doing the same. Pulisic and Leao have some minor physical issues? No problem. He takes Nkunku, Loftus-Cheek, adapts them, moves them, and the machine keeps running. Milan is flying high in the standings despite the absences, because every Sunday there's a new plan and everyone knows what to do.

Defense? It's Our Springboard

I know, I know, someone turns up their nose when they hear about the defensive phase. "Ah, Allegri, always defending…". But let's stop for a moment. For him, solidity is not fear of attacking, it's the security to do it with serenity. If you know you're covered behind, your head is free to invent up front.

After Milan-Napoli, he said a beautiful thing: "In the second half, with the sending-off and the penalty, we had to defend. But we did it well, and when you defend well, you rarely concede goals." It wasn't resignation, it was the awareness of a team that knows it has its back covered.

And then, listen to what he says about Modric: "He's so intelligent that even when he defends, he does it great. Those who play in front of the defense have to steal balls, and stealing them means immediately opening up the counter-attack." Do you understand? Defend to restart. The defensive phase becomes the first step to scoring a goal. Not a bad idea, right?

The Fantasisti? I Love Them, But They Have to Use Their Heads

And we arrive at the point that matters most to us. How does Allegri handle number tens? With artists? The answer is more beautiful than you imagine.

Listen to what Gigi Buffon, who won a lot with Allegri, said: "The difference with Conte? Max gives more trust to the players, especially to those with fantasy. He tries to let them express themselves as they are, as comes naturally to them. Antonio, on the other hand, tends to codify their role more."

This is the point. Allegri doesn't put fantasisti in a tight suit. He doesn't turn them into robots. He lets them be themselves. But there's a condition: they have to be intelligent. They have to understand that freedom is also earned through sacrifice. That talent is a gift, but it must be put at the service of the team.

Take Modric. When Allegri dropped him in front of the defense, a thousand controversies arose. Cassano said: "I can't see Modric playing as a holding midfielder." But Allegri saw beyond. He saw that the Croatian, with his fantastic head, could read the game even from there, intercept balls, and restart the action. And today Modric is second in Serie A for interceptions. He wasn't wasted, he was enhanced in a new, brilliant way.

At Juve, he had done the same with Mandzukic, transformed into a sacrificial left winger, and with Dybala, free to invent but with pressing duties. Because for Allegri, talent and sacrifice are not enemies. They are two sides of the same coin.

The Two Souls of Milan: Together They Win. Too Bad They Play with So Many Foreigners.

Today, at Milan, this idea has found its perfect home. As La Gazzetta says, the Rossoneri have two souls. There's the soul of the "wall," of the compact team that never gives up, built patiently by Allegri. And there's the soul of quality, that of Modric, Rabiot, Leao, Pulisic.

And the beautiful thing is that these two souls don't fight. They coexist, they embrace, they help each other. "There's no opposition, it's a peaceful coexistence," writes Gazzetta. And the numbers speak clearly: Milan is the team that has created the most goal-scoring chances and hit the most woodwork. A lively, cheerful team, not afraid to attack.

So, does this defensivist Allegri, this Allegri who "plays badly," really exist? Or is it just an old story that someone keeps telling? He's demonstrating that you can be solid without being boring, that you can defend with order and attack with fantasy. Like an intelligent boxer, who sometimes steps back to study his opponent, but then comes back and strikes harder.

In short, Massimiliano Allegri is giving us a beautiful lesson: it's not true that to win you have to be ugly. And it's not true that fantasisti can't play with him. He loves them, his artists. But he loves them intelligently, like a demanding father who wants the best for them. He asks for sacrifice, brains, reading of the game. And in return, he gives them the freedom to express themselves and a solid team that protects them.

He's not an enemy of talent. He's its best friend, the one who tells you things as they are, who spurs you to give more, who doesn't let you settle. Because he knows, better than anyone else, that talent without structure gets lost along the way. And structure without talent is just a deadly bore. His greatness? Having found, Sunday after Sunday, the perfect point where these two things meet and embrace. And there, in

that embrace, victory is born.

{18} Antonio Conte

Antonio Conte: The Iron Sergeant and His Difficult Relationship with Fantasy

Friends, today we talk about Antonio Conte. And we do it with the utmost respect, because the numbers speak clearly: scudetti won, records broken, teams transformed. But let's try for a moment to remove the blinders of enthusiasm and look at his philosophy with a slightly more critical eye. Because if it's true that Conte wins, it's also true that his relationship with fantasisti – those slightly unpredictable, slightly anarchic players, the ones who ignite the imagination – has always been, let's say, complicated.

The label of "Iron Sergeant" wasn't stuck on him by accident. And perhaps, behind so much discipline, hides a certain distrust towards everything that cannot be programmed, drawn on the whiteboard, repeated endlessly. Let's go in order.

- The Good Side: The Three-Man Defense as Gospel: He revolutionized Italian football by bringing back the three-man defense, transforming it into an offensive weapon. With Barzagli, Bonucci, and Chiellini, he created a perfect monster.

- The Dark Side: Automatism as Faith: The "11 vs. 0" sessions have become legendary. Players know everything by heart, every movement is mechanical.

- The Athlete Before the Footballer: His teams run like crazy, fight for every ball, have an impressive physical stamina.

- The "Functional" Fantasista: Conte transforms midfielders into goalscorers, exalts players like Vidal, Hakimi, McTominay.

The Professor Who Killed Poetry

Let's start from the beginning. Conte is undoubtedly a passionate scholar. He spent nights watching Sacchi's Milan training sessions, copied Van Gaal's exercises, filled notebooks with notes. But there's a subtle difference between study and dogma. And Conte, over time, slid more and more towards the latter.

His tactical history is a continuous attempt to reduce the unpredictability of football to mathematical formulas. The shift from the experimental 4-2-4 of his early days to the granite 3-5-2 of his maturity is not just a tactical evolution, it's also a metaphor for his thought: less and less space for improvisation, more and more for repetition.

At Juventus, when he realizes that with the four-man line he struggles to make his jewels coexist, he doesn't seek a compromise. He doesn't say: "Let's see how I can adapt my football to Pirlo, Marchisio, and Vidal." He says: "I change the system, I focus on the three-man defense, and they will have to adapt." And it works, sure. But it's already a first sign: the system comes before the players.

The Automatism That Kills the Spark

Let's get to the heart of the problem: the famous "11 vs 0" sessions. Conte made them his trademark, and players have recounted them with admiration mixed with terror. Pirlo said: "To the point of nausea." Fabregas: "Like going back to school." But one has to wonder: does an artist need to go to school? Football is made of patterns, sure. But it's also made of that sudden spark, that impossible dribble, that pass no one expected. What happens when a player, used to repeating the same movements for hours, finds himself facing an unforeseen situation? He risks going into tilt. Because his brain has been programmed to execute, not to invent.

The perfect example is Mario Balotelli. Conte tried with him in the National team, but the relationship didn't last long. Because Supermario is everything Conte can't stand: unpredictable, anarchic, brilliant but also distracted, incapable of fitting into a rigid mechanism. The result? Balotelli was sidelined, and with him a slice of pure talent that perhaps, with a different approach, could have been recovered.

The Cult of the Body: When Physique Becomes a Limit

His teams run more than anyone. This is a fact. David Neres said: "In six months at Napoli, I ran more than in my entire career." Lukaku: "After two weeks, I wanted to call my agent." Now, the dedication to work is admirable. But one has to wonder: is it really necessary to push players to exhaustion?

And above all: what happens to players who don't have that type of physique? Pure fantasisti, those with the classic number ten build, are often slighter, more delicate, more inclined to quality than quantity. Players like a young Totti, like Del Piero, like Zola. Would they survive two weeks of a Conte retreat? Or would they be discarded because "not functional to the system"?

Take Lorenzo Insigne. One of the greatest talents of his generation. Conte in the National team always looked at him with suspicion. He called him up, sure, but he questioned him, preferring more solid players like Éder or Pellè. Why? Because Insigne is a player of pure fantasy, one who needs freedom, to invent, to beat his man. And in a system where everything is codified, that type of player clashes, grates, doesn't fit perfectly.

The "Tamed" Fantasista

Sure, Conte has had success with midfielders turned goalscorers. Vidal, Marchisio, Pogba, Hakimi, McTominay, Anguissa. But are these really fantasisti? Or are they rather quantity players with a good propensity for making runs?

Vidal was a warrior with a good shot. Hakimi a very fast full-back turned wing-back. McTominay a physical midfielder with a goal-scoring

habit. They are all players who have quality, but they are not the "number tens" of the Italian tradition. They are not the ones who ignite the imagination, who invent the play, who give you goosebumps.

And when Conte found himself facing a true fantasista, like Kevin De Bruyne at Chelsea? He sold him. That's right: in 2014, Conte was at Chelsea and De Bruyne, today considered one of the greatest talents of his generation, was sold. Why? Because he wasn't functional enough to the system. Because he was a player of flair, of fantasy, not a perfect cog.

Today, watching De Bruyne dominate in England and Europe, one wonders: what if Conte was wrong? What if instead of bending talent to the system, he should have bent the system to the talent? The question is uncomfortable, but legitimate.

The Human Side: Charisma or Manipulation?

There's no doubt that Conte has trascinante charisma. Players are willing to die for him. But to what extent is this enthusiasm genuine, and to what extent is it the result of a kind of psychological manipulation?

His video sessions that last for hours, the little notes with dietary rules, the maniacal control over every aspect of the players' lives: all this creates an almost eighteenth-century environment, where the coach is the father-master and the players devoted children. Does it work? Yes, in the short term. But in the long term?

The experience at Inter is emblematic: he wins the scudetto in 2021, but the year after, without him, the team doesn't collapse, in fact, it continues to compete. And many players, like Lukaku, had a psychological crash after his departure. A sign that the bond was so strong it became almost an addiction. And addiction, as we know, is never healthy.

In Conclusion: The Genius and His Limit

So, what's the verdict? Is Antonio Conte a great coach? Without a doubt. He's won a lot, left his mark, revolutionized Italian football. But he is also a coach with a clear, evident, almost structural limit: his difficulty in managing pure, non-functional, untamable talent.

His football is a football of warriors, of soldiers, of perfect machines. But football is also poetry, it's also flair, it's also that sudden play that wasn't drawn on the whiteboard. And there, in that border territory,

Conte seems to lose his way.

His successes with Vidal, Hakimi, and McTominay are undeniable. But his failures with Insigne, with Balotelli, with De Bruyne, tell another story. The story of a man so convinced of the goodness of his own system that he cannot see the talent that system cannot contain.

His secret? Having found the perfect meeting point between the sergeant's discipline and the poet's flair. Too bad that, too often, the poet was forced to be a soldier. And when a poet becomes a soldier, something precious, something unrepeatable, is inevitably lost.

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{19} Carlo Mazzone

Carlo Mazzone: The Grandfather of All Fantasisti

- Tactical Philosophy: A false defensivist. Famous for the phrase "Technique is the bread of the rich, tactics is the bread of the poor." In reality, he was a silent innovator: already in the 70s he taught zonal marking at Ascoli and, in its early form, the 3-5-2. His creed was simplicity: give the team a solid identity and then rely on the best men.

- Relationship with Fantasisti: Paternal, total, unequaled. Mazzone didn't "manage" talents, he adopted them. For him, the champion was a son to protect and let express himself freely. As Beppe Signori said: "Before the player, he looked at the human aspect." He was the perfect refuge for those number tens that football often mistreats.

- Legacy and Management: He raised a generation of phenomena: he launched the sixteen-year-old Totti at Roma, gave new life to a Baggio by then discarded by everyone, and made the greatest tactical gift to Italian football: he moved Andrea Pirlo in front of the defense, inventing the role of the modern playmaker.

The False Defensivist: A Simple Innovator

For decades, Carlo Mazzone was the victim of an unfair label: that of the "simpleton," the peasant of the bench, the shouting defensivist who made his teams play badly. But the truth, as often happens, is much more interesting. As an analysis by Guerin Sportivo recalls, his Ascoli in the seventies already played zonal, and in modern terms practiced a sort of 3-5-2. Without flaunting it, without pontificating on TV like the 'present-day coaches' he so despised.

His philosophy is encapsulated in a phrase that is a manifesto: "Technique is the bread of the rich, tactics is the bread of the poor." For Mazzone, tactics were not an end, but a means. They served to give order, to cover backs, to make the team "normal." And once "normality" was guaranteed, the time came to bring out the bread of the rich: the technique, the fantasy, the unpredictability of his lads.

He wasn't a man of fixed formations. His stylistic hallmark was grit and the ability to transmit a fierce determination to his players. But this grit was never an end in itself: it was the shield behind which his artists could paint in peace.

The "Second Father" of Number Tens

If there's a red thread linking Mazzone's career, it's his innate ability to connect with the greatest talents in Italian football. He himself said: "Those kissed by talent consider the ball a simple thing. The less a coach complicates things, the more the champion benefits." And that's exactly what he did for a lifetime.

- With Francesco Totti, at Roma, he was a adoptive father. He put him on the field very young and protected him, teaching him the secrets of the trade. The relationship was so profound that upon Mazzone's death, Totti greeted him with words as heavy as boulders: "Father, coach, and master. Eternally grateful."

- With Roberto Baggio, at Brescia, he performed a small secular miracle. The Divine Ponytail was considered finished, a foreign body to top-level football. Mazzone welcomed him, put him at the center of the project, and got one of the most beautiful rebirths in football history out of him. Baggio always remembered him with emotion: "He was a giant

of humanity. For him, I would have done the impossible. He, more than anyone, understood what kind of person I am."

- With Giuseppe Signori, at Bologna, he repeated himself. Signori arrived from a difficult period, operated on for a herniated disc. Mazzone wanted him at all costs, managed him with almost maniacal care, and made him the beacon of that miracle Bologna that came close to the UEFA Cup final. Signori was very clear: "For me, he was a second father. Until Saturday he was Mazzone, and as he used to say, on Sunday the ignorant brother arrived."

The Greatest Tactical Lesson: The Invention of Pirlo as a Playmaker

Beyond human management, Mazzone left an immense tactical legacy to football, often forgotten or attributed to others. It was he, at Brescia, who observed a young Andrea Pirlo, saw his quality and fragility, and made a crazy and brilliant decision: he moved him from the attacking midfield to in front of the defense.

In an era when the playmaker was a gladiator or an interceptor, Mazzone had the intuition to put a poet there. He opened up a world for him, as Pirlo himself later said. He gave him the time and space to watch the game from afar and orchestrate play. That move, starting from a provincial bench, revolutionized world football. Without Mazzone, probably, there would have been no Pirlo of Ancelotti's Milan, nor that of Juventus and the National team.

The Character and the Man

Mazzone was also (and perhaps above all) a character. Unforgettable his run under the Atalanta curva after a comeback draw by his Brescia, in response to the insults received. A scene of pure humanity, adrenaline, revenge. He himself then said: "But that wasn't me, it was my twin."

He was "Er Magara," the Roman who multiplied dreams with his

genuine dialect. He was the man who, to a young Amedeo Carboni, a Roma full-back who pushed forward, asked: "Amedé, how many goals have you scored in your career? Four? So why the hell are you going forward to attack!" A joke that tells of his practical, immediate, never sophisticated but always effective vision.

In Conclusion: The Guardian of Fantasy

Carlo Mazzone was not an innovator in the modern sense of the term. He didn't write tactical books or revolutionize formations (even if he practiced the 3-5-2 as early as the 70s). His greatness was another: he created an environment where talent could flourish. He protected his lads, made them human before footballers, and in return got unforgettable performances.

He was the guardian of fantasy in a football that often mistreats it. He gave Baggio his last youth, Totti his first wings, Pirlo his life. And he did it with the simplicity of one who knows that, in the end, football is just a game. A beautiful game, to be lived with heart in hand and the run of a crazy "twin" under the curva.

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{20} Modern Coaches

A journey through the different schools of thought shaping contemporary Italian football.

Modern Italian Coaches in Serie A: Tactical Philosophy and Relationship with Fantasisti

Italian football has always been an open-air tactical laboratory. But if in the past tradition imposed a certain way of understanding the game, today's modern Italian coaches are rewriting the rules, contaminating our defensive heritage with European influences and a renewed attention to creative talent.

The relationship with fantasisti – those unpredictable, brilliant, sometimes anarchic players – is perhaps the most precise thermometer for measuring the evolution of a football school. Because the fantasista, by his nature, escapes categorizations, rigid patterns, obsessive repetitions. So, how do the best Italian coaches of today relate to them?

Simone Inzaghi: The Innovator Who Rediscovers the Role of the Playmaker (when he was at Inter)

- Tactical Philosophy: Offensive and dominant football based on a three-man defense, with great attention to building from the back and the central role of the wing-backs.

- Relationship with Fantasisti: He invented a new figure: the deep-lying playmaker who sets play from the defense, freeing up midfielders for runs. His fantasisti are often the wing-backs, transformed into extra wingers.

- Key Examples: Calhanoglu transformed into a playmaker in front of the defense. Dimarco and Darmian exalted as total wide players capable of attacking and defending.

Simone Inzaghi perhaps represents the most modern synthesis between Italian tradition and European influences. His Lazio first and his Inter later have always proposed offensive, dominant, never defeatist football. But his most original contribution to modern tactics is another.

As highlighted by journalist Riccardo Trevisani, Inzaghi "invented a profession: that of substituting the booked player." It may seem like a detail, but it reveals a deep understanding of the modern game:

"Today, a team that goes down to ten men loses 85, 90, perhaps 95% of the time." Inzaghi was the first to understand it and translate it into practice.

But Inzaghi's most lasting legacy is the transformation of Hakan Calhanoglu. The Turk, from a pure attacking midfielder, has become one of the strongest playmakers in Europe. A metamorphosis reminiscent of Pirlo under Ancelotti, and demonstrating how the best Italian coaches know how to reinvent players to enhance their qualities in new roles.

Today at Inter, the "fantasisti" are often the wing-backs: Dimarco, Darmian, Dumfries. Players who are not classic number tens, but have total freedom to attack spaces, cross, make runs. And behind them, a three-man defense guarantees cover and security.

Gian Piero Gasperini: The Visionary Who Reinvented Offensive Play

- Tactical Philosophy: Man-to-man all over the pitch, suffocating pressing, vertical play, and continuous offensive movement. A unique system in the Italian landscape.

- Relationship with Fantasisti: His fantasisti are often wide attackers transformed into raiders, or mezzali with license to attack. Gasperini's "Gospel" demands total dedication to pressing and movement.

- Key Examples: Gomez, Ilicic, Malinovskyi: none of them was a classic centre-forward, but all scored avalanches of goals under his guidance. Today at Roma, he's working on new talents like Sulemana and El Aynaoui.

Gasperini is probably the most original and influential Italian coach of the last decade. His 3-4-2-1 or 3-4-1-2 has become a trademark recognizable throughout Europe. But his relationship with fantasisti deserves a separate chapter.

In Bergamo, Gasperini took players considered "anomalous" – Gomez (162 cm of pure fantasy), Ilicic (slow, elegant, unpredictable), Malinovskyi (a cannon from distance) – and turned them into goal machines. How? By giving them total freedom of movement, but within a very rigid system of pressing and sacrifice. The pact is clear: "I let you invent, but if you lose the ball, you win it back immediately."

Today at Roma, Gasperini is trying to replicate the formula. The arrival of Leon Bailey and El Aynaoui follows the same logic: quality players, quick, unpredictable, but with the physical structure to withstand his pressing. And the first signs are encouraging.

Vincenzo Italiano and the New Generation: The 4-2-3-1 as a Manifesto

- Tactical Philosophy: Offensive play, possession, building from the back, high pressing. A courageous and modern idea of football, influenced by European schools.

- Relationship with Fantasisti: The 4-2-3-1 is the ideal system to exalt attacking midfielders. Italiano looks for players capable of inventing between the lines, but also of sacrificing themselves in the non-possession phase.

- Key Examples: At Bologna, he's working with Jonathan Rowe and

Bernardeschi, two quality players capable of operating in the attacking midfield. His philosophy aims to give creative freedom within a clear framework.

Italiano represents the new generation of Italian coaches who have absorbed the influences of European football without denying their own roots. His 4-2-3-1 is a manifesto: two holding midfielders in front of the defense, three attacking midfielders free to invent, a striker acting as a pivot.

At Bologna, he's trying to replicate what he did in Florence: offensive play, possession, vertical passes. The arrival of Jonathan Rowe and Bernardeschi follows the logic of seeking quality players for the attacking midfield, capable of beating their man and making runs. The relationship with fantasisti is clear: "You're free to invent, but you also have to track back and press." A modern balance, looking to Europe without forgetting Italy.

New Talents and Their Role in the System

It's interesting to note how new Serie A signings for 2025/2026 are often labelled as "midfielders" in Fantacalcio, while being de facto attacking midfielders or wingers. This reveals a trend: modern fantasisti are no longer pure number tens, but players capable of covering multiple roles, moving between the lines, sacrificing themselves in the non-possession phase.

- Valentin Carboni (Genoa): crystalline talent, vision, and bursts,

inserted into an offensive context that values technical profiles.

- Noa Lang (Napoli): pure attacker called to inherit Kvara's legacy, with license to invent.

The new generation of fantasisti is more athletic, more complete, more functional to the demands of modern football. And Italian coaches are learning to value them.

The Legacy of the Great Masters

One cannot speak of modern Italian coaches without mentioning those who paved the way.

- Arrigo Sacchi revolutionized world football with his Milan, demonstrating that you could win by playing offensive, pressing, courageous football. His philosophy – pressing, high line, zonal defense – is the basis of all modern football.

- Carlo Ancelotti gathered that legacy and transformed it into a unique ability to manage champions, creating an environment where talent can express itself to the fullest.

- Giovanni Trapattoni taught the importance of structure and repetition, demonstrating that success is built with method and discipline.

Today, Inzaghi, Gasperini, and Italiano are the custodians of this legacy. Each in his own way, each with his own philosophy, but all united by a common thread: the ability to put talent at the service of the team, without ever suffocating it.

In Conclusion: Towards a New Balance

Modern Italian coaches are demonstrating that the dichotomy between "beautiful game" and "result" is outdated. Allegri wins with a solid defense but also with the highest number of chances created. Conte overwhelmingly wins with suffocating pressing and midfielders turned bombers. Inzaghi enchants with his offensive football and tactical innovations. Gasperini amazes with his vertical game and atypical fantasisti. Italiano proposes courageous and modern football.

The relationship with fantasisti is no longer one of distrust, but of demanding love. Today's Italian coaches ask their number tens for intelligence, sacrifice, reading of the game. In return, they offer them the freedom to express themselves and the certainty of a solid team

behind them.

They are not enemies of talent. They are, rather, its most demanding allies. Because they know that talent, without structure, is destined to dissipate. And structure, without talent, is just boredom. Their greatness lies in having found, match after match, the perfect point of equilibrium.

Roberto De Zerbi: The Visionary Who Took Fantasy to Another Level

- Tactical Philosophy: Offensive football, possession, building from the back, high pressing. A courageous and radical idea of the game, often compared to Guardiola's for the obsession with dominance and beauty.

- Relationship with Fantasisti: He himself was a fantasista. As a player, he was a pure number ten, nicknamed "Dejan" for his resemblance to Savićević. Today, as a coach, he builds his teams to exalt creativity, giving total freedom to his attacking midfielders but within a very rigid structure of movements and possession.

- Key Examples: At Sassuolo, he launched Raspadori, Locatelli, and Berardi, turning them into national phenomena. At Brighton, he exalted Mac Allister, Caicedo, and Mitoma, taking the club into Europe for the first time. Marino's Pupil: The Roots of a Visionary

To understand De Zerbi, you have to start from afar. As a player, he was a classic number ten, a "fantasista" or "mezzapunta" as they used to say. Raised in Milan's youth system, he never broke through at the

highest levels, but he met a key figure: Pasquale Marino. With him, at Foggia and Catania, De Zerbi learned what it meant to play offensive football based on the 4-3-3 and possession, in an era when defensivism dominated in Italy. As a player, he defined himself as a "right winger" in Marino's 4-3-3, capable of scoring and creating. In short, he has the DNA of a fantasista sewn onto him.

The Revolution at Sassuolo: The Courage to Dare

His first real imprint in Serie A was with Sassuolo. There, between 2018 and 2021, De Zerbi did things that in Italy seemed almost heresy: building from the back at all costs, obsessive possession, a very high defensive line, and a 4-2-3-1 that was a work of art in motion. Sassuolo was the team with the highest pass completion percentage in the league (90%), but it wasn't sterile possession: it was a weapon to tire the opponent and strike.

And the fantasisti? They were at the center of the project. De Zerbi took kids like Giacomo Raspadori, Manuel Locatelli, and Domenico Berardi and turned them into national team players. He didn't bridle them in rigid patterns, but put them in a position to express themselves freely, while demanding from them an unnatural dedication to movement and ball recovery. His wide players, like Berardi and Boga, were "inverted wingers" who cut inside to create numerical superiority, while the midfielders made runs. It was total football, where function determined form, but the form was always beautiful.

International Consecration: Brighton and the Premier League

After the parenthesis at Shakhtar Donetsk (interrupted by the war), De Zerbi landed at Brighton. And there he became famous worldwide. He inherited Graham Potter's team and took it to another level: sixth place in the Premier League, the first European qualification in their history, and a game that drove critics and opponents crazy.

His football was pure poetry: possession, courage, and a unique ability to develop young talents. Under him, Alexis Mac Allister, Moises Caicedo, and Kaoru Mitoma exploded to stellar levels, becoming targets of top European clubs. De Zerbi didn't "tame" them, he exalted them. He gave them the freedom to express themselves, but within a structure so clear that they always knew where to go and what to do.

Pep Guardiola, who knows football, said that De Zerbi "has changed many things in English football." A heavy legacy, for someone who came from the Italian provinces.

The Critical Side: The Dogma That Sometimes Kills

But, as for all visionaries, there's also a flip side. De Zerbi is an ideologue of beauty. He himself said: "I have my ideas and I don't change them to showcase a player." This means that, sometimes, his system can become a dogma that suffocates talent instead of exalting it.

His teams are often vulnerable defensively, because the risk of being exposed is high. At Brighton, there were matches where possession became an end in itself, and the team conceded goals on the counter-attack. His obsession with building from the back can turn into a boomerang against teams that press high.

And then, there's his character. De Zerbi is a volcano, capable of getting three reds and four yellows in a season for his reactions. His passion is his strength, but sometimes it risks becoming a limit. As he learned from the bad experience at Palermo, where he was sacked after 13 matches: "I hadn't properly analyzed the situation."

Furthermore, as highlighted in a recent analysis, his profile carries risks: "certain De Zerbi teams can seem too audacious, take risky passes even in wrong situations, and be defensively vulnerable if the counter-pressing fails." It's the price to pay for such extreme football.

In Conclusion: De Zerbi's Legacy in Italian Football

Where does De Zerbi fit in the panorama of modern Italian coaches? He is perhaps the most radical of all. More than Allegri (pragmatic), more than Conte (disciplinarian), more than Gasperini (intensity). He is a poet of tactics, a visionary who took the concept of "positional play" to the extreme.

His relationship with fantasisti is natural, almost genetic: he was one of them, and for them he builds his football. But he demands that his artists also be workers, that they run, press, sacrifice. It's not a contradiction: it's his idea of total football.

His greatness? Having demonstrated that you can win (and convince) by staying true to your ideas, even when everyone around you tells you that you are too extreme. And his most beautiful lesson? Having brought courage and beauty to the center of the Italian football debate, inspiring a new generation of coaches and fans to believe that football can be, first and foremost, a spectacle.

10.

If we close our eyes and let our hearts guide our memories, they return. One by one. The lords of defense, the guardians of the penalty area, those men who made Italian football a school admired throughout the world. Dates, numbers, statistics don't matter. What matters are the faces, the sweaty jerseys, that look that said: "you shall not pass." Let me tell you about them, as if we were sitting on a bench in an old field, watching the sun set.

Paolo Maldini. When you say his name, it's as if you're saying "defense" in every language of the world. Twenty-five years with the same shirt, that of Milan, and 647 times in that league which was his home. He said a simple and profound thing: "If I have to make a tackle, it means I've already made a mistake." And he was right. His elegance, that long stride, that way of being on the pitch as if the ball were waiting for him... he wasn't just a defender, he was the Captain. You could put him on the left or in the center, it changed little: he was always the best. When he stopped, Milan retired the number 3 forever. Because certain numbers belong to just one person.

Franco Baresi. Too small to be a defender, they said. But actually, no. Baresi read the minds of attackers, anticipated them before they even thought of shooting. He was the libero, the playmaker of the defense, the beating heart of that Milan that made you dream. He lived through everything with that shirt: the tears of relegation and the glory of triumphs. That Milan of 1988-89, with Sacchi on the bench and Baresi at the heart of the defense, is still there, in our dreams, as one of the most beautiful teams that ever played. When he left, his number 6 flew away with him.

Gaetano Scirea. He was another story. While Italian football boasted of its fierceness, Scirea responded with grace. Also a libero, but with a

different aesthetic, almost gentle. And to think he never received a red card in his entire career. In a world of ferocious defenders, he was a gentleman. He won everything, absolutely everything, and then left too soon, in that damned accident in Poland. Football, that day, lost a piece of nobility. Of those five who won everything in life, he was one. And we remember him like that, with that elegance that will never return.

Claudio Gentile. The opposite of Scirea. He didn't mark you, he enveloped you, he took your breath away, he made you feel his weight on every inch. That match with Maradona in the '82 World Cup is legend. Kempes, with that joke that still makes you laugh, said: "If you went to the bathroom, Gentile would follow you." But it wasn't just nastiness: it was discipline, it was tactics, it was a fierce art. Because stopping Maradona, Zico, the greatest in the world, wasn't for everyone. It took brains, as well as legs.

Giuseppe Bergomi. "Lo Zio" (The Uncle). A kid who debuted at 17 for Inter and never let go until he was 39. 756 matches with those colors. You could put him wherever you wanted, he always did his duty. In that '82 World Cup final, against Germany, he was there, unmarkable. A rock. The kind that weathers any storm.

Alessandro Nesta. Watching him was like witnessing a ballet. His tackles were perfect, clean, almost polite. But when needed, he was there. Four times the best defender in Serie A, more than anyone else. At Lazio and Milan, he wrote pages of football that no one forgets. Because there's a way of defending that is poetry, and he knew it well.

Fabio Cannavaro. The defender who won the Ballon d'Or. Something that seemed impossible, yet he did it. In 2006, as captain, he took Italy to the top of the world. Short to be a center-back, but in the air he was a giant. With Nesta, in that World Cup, they conceded only two goals: one from a header, but it was an own goal, and one from a penalty. Crazy stuff. A defense that seemed like a reinforced concrete wall.

Giorgio Chiellini. The last of the Mohicans. Nine consecutive scudetti with Juve, a streak that seemed impossible. He was there, always, with that grit, that face, that way of putting his soul into it before his body. He took the baton from the greats and carried it into the new century, never dropping it. When you saw him exulting, with that mask of pain and joy, you understood that the heart of the Italian defense was still beating.

Giacinto Facchetti and Antonio Cabrini. Two who taught full-backs how it's done. Facchetti, with Herrera at Inter, went up and down the flank

like a train, and he also scored, 59 goals in his career, no small feat. He invented a new way of playing, and for this we remember him as a pioneer. Cabrini, on the other hand, had technique, crossing, intelligence. On the left, with Juve, he made opposing wingers dance. And he too, like many of these gentlemen, lifted the World Cup in '82.

What we carry inside

All these men, so different from each other, had one thing in common: they didn't play for themselves. They played for the team, for that wall that rose up and said "you shall not pass." Trapattoni, with that phrase that sounds like poetry, said: "Our football is prose, not poetry." And they were the prose: organized, solid, collective.

Yet, looking at Maldini, Baresi, Scirea, Nesta... one can't help but think that even prose, sometimes, can become poetry. Because defending, when you do it like that, is not destroying. It's creating. Creating order from chaos, security from danger. It's the stage on which the fantasisti, those crazy geniuses of the number 10, could invent their magic.

As we will see in the hypothetical conversation between Gentile and Sívori, they knew it: without the artists, they would have been just men chasing a ball. But without them, the artists would have been just men dancing alone. Together, on that same pitch, they made Serie A great. An era when prose and poetry held hands, and Italian football was the most beautiful in the world.

And now that we look back, with eyes slightly moist from remembering, we seem to see them still. Them, the lords of defense. There, in their place. Guarding an idea of football that perhaps will never return.

Before talking about the fantasisti, let's allow ourselves a little dream: let's imagine what some of the greatest defenders might hypothetically say to the fantasisti themselves.

Trapattoni vs. Pelé

It's a strange thing to imagine, a conversation between two men who, each in their own way, shaped the very idea of Italian football. Giovanni Trapattoni, the patriarch of pragmatism, the man who once declared that "our football is prose, not poetry" — our football is prose, not poetry — sitting opposite Pelé, who was, quite simply, poetry in

person.

If they were ever to meet, perhaps in a quiet corner away from the din of the stadiums, the conversation wouldn't start with tactics or formations. It would start, I believe, with a memory.

Trapattoni would probably remind Pelé of that evening in Milan, on May 12, 1963. The friendly between Italy and Brazil, a 3-0 for the Azzurri, a match that for years had been described as the night Trapattoni "marked and nullified" the great Pelé. And then, with the honesty that comes with age, Il Trap would wave his hand and smile, perhaps a little melancholic. He would confess what he has always confessed: that it was folklore, nothing more. He would tell Pelé he knew, he had always known, that that King played that night with a swollen knee, forced to stay on the field for only 26 minutes just to honor a contract, not to conquer Italy. "You played 26 minutes," he might say, in a hoarse voice, "and I've spent decades telling anyone who would listen that you were right. Legend has been kinder to me than reality."

But then, with a glint in his eye, he would recall the other encounters. The Intercontinental Cup later that same year, Milan against Santos. A different story. Pelé, in perfect form, scoring both goals for his team, dribbling half of Milan's defense as if they were bowling pins. Trapattoni would admit, with the self-irony of one who has seen it all, that he tried everything that night. He was, in his own words, "much more of a midfielder than a gentleman." And even that wasn't enough.

If the conversation then turned, as it inevitably must, to the nature of genius, Trapattoni would become thoughtful. He has often been asked to compare the immortals, and he has always refused these bar-room puzzles. But to Pelé, he might offer the distinction he once made to a journalist. "Maradona was pure adrenaline," he would say, echoing his own words, "a compressed and wild genius. But you... you were the most complete player I have ever known. The most complete I have ever played against." He would gesture with his hands, trying to give shape to the immensity of the thought. "Right foot, left foot, acrobatics, free kicks. And the header..." Here he would pause, leaving the memory suspended in the air. "How can I forget that leap in the '70 final? The way you seemed to float in the air, defying everything, and poor Burgnich... he was a great defender, and you made him look like a kid watching a magic trick."

Pelé, in his gentlemanly way, might deflect the compliments, but Trapattoni would insist. He would talk about how Pelé had combined

two roles into one — the number nine and the number ten — decades before anyone else. He would marvel at the numbers: three World Cups, more than a thousand goals. And then, perhaps with a sadness that would have crept into his voice during the conversation, he would reflect on what his football, Italian football, had become.

"You see, Pelé," he might say, "my football has always been prose. I was proud of it. We built teams, organized, won. But we always knew that you were the poetry. You were the reason people fell in love with this game. And now..." He would trail off, thinking of the sterile temples of athleticism, the pressing machines, the young footballers taught to run but not to dream. "Now, everyone wants to be prose. They've forgotten how to write a poem. They've forgotten that without players like you, there's nothing to fall in love with."

It would be a conversation between two old men, yes. But also a conversation between two worlds that have slowly drifted apart. The world of the pragmatist who respected art, and the world of the artist who understood that even poetry needs a stage. And as they parted, Trapattoni might shake Pelé's hand and, with a gentle smile, offer him the highest compliment he knows: "You know, for a poet, you were quite a competitor."

Claudio Gentile vs. Omar Sívori

It's an image that today's football, so aseptic and programmed, wouldn't even know how to conceive anymore. Claudio Gentile, the defender who made marking a ruthless art, and Omar Sívori, the rebel fantasista who turned football into a continuous provocation. Let's imagine them, before a match, in one of those old dressing rooms, with bare walls and air thick with smoke and liniment.

Gentile, as is known, was not a man of many words. His eloquence was made of tackles, of suffocating marking, of that aggressive grit that gave even the bravest chills. As Mario Kempes said: "If you went to the bathroom, Gentile would follow you." But that evening, perhaps, as Sívori entered with his elegant and provocative gait, his long hair and the look of one who knows he's the best, Gentile felt the need to break that silence that smelled of challenge.

He approached, with that heavy step of a full-back who never gives up, and said to him, with a smile that was more of a grimace: "Listen, Sívori. I know you want to be the phenomenon tonight. I know you have that move in your head, the nutmeg, the one only you can

imagine. But first, let me get one thing straight: when I kick you for ninety minutes, when you feel my breath on your neck for every ball, when I don't let you breathe... what do you think? That I'm just a brute? That I don't understand anything about football?"

Sívori, who was used to provocations and indeed sought them to fuel his fire, stopped. He turned slowly, with that air of superiority that drove half of Italy crazy, and looked him straight in the eye. Then, with that Argentine accent that mixed Naples and Buenos Aires, he replied: "I think, Gentile, that if I spent time thinking about you, I'd have already lost. I think about the goal. I think about the goal. I think about how to make you spin like a puppet. You're just an obstacle. A necessary obstacle, perhaps. But just an obstacle."

Gentile nodded, as if that answer was somehow what he was looking for. "I know," he said, "I know that for you I'm just that. But me, Sívori, without you, without someone like you to mark, I would have been nothing. You gave me a reason to get up on Sunday morning. To sweat in training. To study your movements like you study an enemy. I hate you, on the pitch. But off it, I know that without your genius, my job wouldn't have the same flavor."

Sívori lit a cigarette, a gesture that today would horrify any athletic

trainer, but back then was simply part of the ritual. He exhaled the smoke towards the ceiling and then looked at Gentile with a look that, for the first time perhaps, was not challenging. "You know, Gentile, I've always thought that defenders like you were my counterweight. Without you, my plays would just be exercises in style. I needed to feel your breath on my neck. I needed that anger, that nastiness. Because only then, when I managed to get past you, to slip through you, to make you look like a spectator, only then did I know I had done something real."

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of studs on concrete and the distant voices of the crowd beginning to fill the stadium. Then Gentile spoke again, in a lower, almost confidential voice: "Sometimes, the night before matches, I close my eyes and try to imagine what goes on in your head. What drives you to attempt certain plays, to risk failure just to try the impossible. I never succeeded. I was born to prevent, not to invent. But I always respected you, Sívori. Even when I insulted you, even when I left my mark on you. It was my way of telling you that you were important."

Sívori stubbed out his cigarette under his shoe and stood up. He adjusted his shorts and looked at Gentile with a half-smile, the kind that wasn't given easily. "I know, Gentile. I know. And I, when I scored, when the roar of the stadium drowned out my voice, sometimes I thought of you. I thought that without your shadow, that light wouldn't have been so beautiful. Maybe, deep down, we were the same thing. Two sides of the same coin. You the prose, me the poetry. But without one, the other would have no meaning."

As they went out for the warm-up, Gentile reached out a hand and placed it on Sívori's shoulder. A brief, almost imperceptible gesture. Then he whispered to him: "Tonight, though, I'm giving you nothing. I'll do my job. And you do yours. And at the end, whatever happens, we'll shake hands. Because this is football. Because without you, I'd just be a man chasing a ball. And without me, you'd just be a man dancing alone."

Sívori didn't reply. But as he crossed the threshold to the pitch, he turned for an instant. Their eyes met, and in that silent exchange was everything: the challenge, the respect, the awareness that both, in their own way, were about to write a piece of history. He with his fantasy, the other with his sacrifice. Together, even as adversaries, guarding that mystery that only football can give.

Gaetano Scirea vs. Diego Maradona

There's an image I've carried inside me forever, like a photograph faded by time but still clear in my heart. It's the encounter that today's football, so fast and distracted, so full of numbers and empty of soul, wouldn't even know how to dream anymore. Gaetano Scirea and Diego Armando Maradona. Two men, two worlds, two opposite ways of living the same game. Yet, somehow, destined to understand each other.

Gaetano Scirea Italia V Messico Roma 1984

Scirea, the defender who never received a red card in his entire life. Think about it for a moment. In a profession where nastiness was almost an obligation, where defenders competed to see who could leave the deepest mark, he marked with the elegance of a dancer and the moral sense of an educator. How can you be like that? How can you stop the greatest attackers in the world without ever losing your dignity, without ever stooping to violence? He managed it. Always.

And Maradona. The rebel genius, the number 10 who came from the streets and whom the streets had carried in triumph all over the world. The one who with a ball did things that seemed like magic, who made entire nations cry and anyone who loved football smile. The one who

faced defenders every day, who carried the marks of a thousand battles on his body, bruises as medals, kicks as the price to pay for being the greatest.

Imagine them there, before a match that no longer exists, in a dressing room that smells of history and sweat. Perhaps at the San Paolo in Naples, perhaps at the Comunale in Turin. Two temples of football that have seen generations of champions pass through, but that day, who knows, held their breath.

Maradona is already there, with that street urchin air he never lost, even when he became God. The rebellious curls, the proud look, the brazen smile of one who knows he can do anything on the pitch. Then the door opens and Scirea enters. With that almost shy discretion, that light step that doesn't seem like a defender's, those clear, limpid eyes like the water of a stream. The eyes of one who never needed nastiness to be respected. The eyes of one who, simply, is a good person.

Maradona sees him and something magical happens. That brazen smile, the one he puts on show for everyone to hide who knows what fragility, transforms. It becomes different. Truer. More human. As if in front of Scirea, masks weren't needed. As if that clean man reminded him that football could be something else.

"Gaetano" – his voice, when he speaks, has a tone he uses with few. Those he has truly learned to esteem. Those who don't betray you, don't use you, don't reduce you to an enemy. "Listen, before we start, I have to tell you something. I've been playing against you for years. In Italy, in the National team, in these matches that seem like wars. And every time I ask myself: but how does he do it? How does he stop me without ever getting a card? How does he look me in the eye without fear, but also without that nastiness that everyone else has?"

Scirea smiles. It's not a perfunctory smile, it's that calm that brought peace even on the most tumultuous Sundays, when stadiums roared and tackles were felt to the bone. He sits down next to him, like two old friends meeting at a bar after a lifetime, remembering times gone by.

"Diego, I never needed to be nasty. Football isn't war. It's a game. And in a game, if you're intelligent, you can anticipate your opponent's moves without having to destroy him. I watch you, Diego, and I try to understand what you're going to do. Not to stop you at all costs. To

understand. Because you, more than anyone else, are unpredictable. But if I can read your thought a second before you turn it into movement, then I can stay close to you without having to hurt you."

Maradona looks at him as if he were listening to music he didn't know, a sweet melody in a world of deafening noise. Because no defender had ever spoken to him like that. Ever.

"You know, Gaetano, I'm used to everything. To those who pull my shirt, who kick me, who insult me. Sometimes, in the evening, I have bruises that look like drawings on my skin. I've gotten used to it. Part of the game, they say. But with you, it's different. You're the only one who, when he marks me, doesn't leave a mark. Yet, you're always there. You're like a shadow, but a polite shadow, that doesn't take your breath away, but makes you feel it's there. How do you do it? Teach me."

Scirea adjusts his graying hair, with that measured gesture he also had on the pitch, when it seemed that time stopped to wait for his next move.

"Because I don't want to take your breath away, Diego. I want to take away your space. They're two different things, see? You need to breathe to be who you are, to invent the things only you can invent. If I smother you, if I hurt you, the genius goes out. And I, even though I'm playing against you, want the genius to be there. I want to challenge the best Maradona, not a tired one full of bruises. Because only then, if I manage to stop you, do I know I've done something real. Only then does the match make sense."

Maradona lights a cigarette. He always did it before matches, they said. A gesture that today would horrify any athletic trainer, but back then was simply part of the ritual, of his way of being Diego before being Maradona. He exhales the smoke towards the ceiling and then looks at Scirea with eyes that, for once, are not challenging. They are eyes searching for something. Perhaps confirmation. Perhaps friendship. Perhaps just a bit of humanity in a world that had given him so little.

"You know what I think, Gaetano? I think you're the only defender who made me feel... respected. Not just as a footballer, as a man. The others treat me like an enemy to be defeated. For them, I'm an obstacle, a rare beast to be tamed by any means. You treat me like an

opponent to be understood. And this thing here, for someone like me who comes from the streets, who had to fight for everything, who always had to prove he was the strongest or else they'd erase him... this thing is worth more than a thousand compliments. More than a thousand trophies."

Scirea nods, with that serene air that seemed to come from another era, another way of understanding life.

"Because I, Diego, come from a different path than you. I haven't had your battles, I haven't had to fight like you fought. But in the end, we learned the same thing: that football is made of people, before champions. I never got a red card in my career. It's not because I'm good. It's because I always thought that if I have to leave the field for hurting someone, I've lost before the match even ends. I've lost as a man. And then, how could I look my son in the eye and tell him I won, if I know I won through nastiness? What would I have taught him?"

Maradona stubs out his cigarette and moves closer. With that intensity that commanded respect even when he didn't speak, even when he was still. He seems to want to get inside those clear eyes, to understand where so much strength without violence comes from.

"Gaetano, I've made mistakes in life. I'll make more. I know. But when I play against you, I feel like I can just be the footballer. Not Diego from the streets, not the one who has to prove something at all costs, not the rebel, not the provocateur. Just the footballer. The one who loves the ball more than anything else. And this, perhaps, is the greatest gift a defender can give an attacker. Making him feel free to be just himself."

There was a long silence. Not the embarrassing kind you try to fill at all costs. The kind that is full, dense, that says more than a thousand words. In that silence was all the respect in the world, all the mutual admiration, all the beauty of two men recognizing each other for who they are, beyond jerseys and flags.

Then Scirea spoke again, with that voice that seemed like a caress, that seemed to want to protect even his opponent.

"You know, Diego, I admire you. Not just for what you do with the ball, which is out of this world. But for what you represent. For the people you make dream. For the kids who play in the streets and try to imitate

you. I defend, you attack. But in the end, we have the same purpose: to give emotions. Only you do it with fantasy, I with sacrifice. And that's fine. Because football is beautiful precisely for this: because it's made of different things that meet, clash, and in the end understand each other."

Maradona reached out a hand and shook his. It wasn't the ritual handshake between opponents who respect each other out of duty. It was something more. It was the recognition that, in that world of wolves where everyone bites each other, there was still room for decent men. For those who don't need to stoop to win. For those who win by standing tall.

"Gaetano, on the pitch tonight I promise you something. I'll try to get past you. I'll try to score. Because it's my job, and I don't know how to do anything else. It's what they taught me, it's what I do best. But if I succeed, I'll do it with a smile. I'll do it thinking of this moment, this handshake. And if I don't succeed, if you're stronger tonight, at the end I'll come and shake your hand and tell you: 'Today you won, but I played against the most honest of all.' And for me, believe me, that's a victory anyway."

Scirea stood up, adjusted his jersey as he always did before going on the pitch, and looked at Maradona with those clear eyes that seemed to contain an entire life philosophy, an entire conception of the world.

"Diego, on the pitch I'll do my duty. I'll stay close to you, try to anticipate you, take away your space. I can't do otherwise, it's my role. But know this, every time you manage to get past me, there will also be applause inside me. A silent applause, that no one will hear. Because getting past Scirea isn't easy. Everyone knows that. And if you can do it, it means you're truly the greatest. And I, even as an opponent, can say I played against the greatest."

As they went out for the warm-up, their eyes met one last time. And in that silent exchange, in that suspended moment, there was everything. The rivalry that would see them as protagonists for ninety minutes. The respect that went beyond the result. The awareness of being two sides of the same coin, two different ways of living football, but united by something deeper: the love for that game that had made them immortal.

Today that both are gone, who left in different ways and too soon, this image often comes back to my mind. Gaetano Scirea, who left us on a

road in Warsaw, in an accident that seemed impossible for someone so attentive, so measured, so full of life. Diego Armando Maradona, who left taking away a piece of all our childhoods, leaving a void that no goal will ever fill.

And who knows. Perhaps in some corner of football heaven, up there where the fields are green forever and time doesn't matter, those two really did meet. Scirea with his unchanged elegance, Maradona with his eternal genius. Talking about football, about life, about that mystery that only they, in their own way, knew how to tell. Shaking hands once more, like two old friends who have understood everything.

Because in the end, perhaps, that's exactly what football is. A pretext to meet. A way to tell each other, without words, that you have understood each other. That you were adversaries, but first and foremost men. And that certain matches, certain stories, certain encounters, never end.

Giorgio Chiellini vs. Gianni Rivera

There was once a football that knew how to dream. The one that today runs too fast to stop and watch a sunset, to listen to the sound of studs on the concrete of a dressing room that smells of history and sweat. And in that football that is no more, or perhaps that still exists only in our memories, I would like to imagine an encounter.

Giorgio Chiellini, the last of the warriors, the one who defended the Italian goal with his teeth and his heart, with that gladiator's face and the soul of one who never gives up. And Gianni Rivera, the "Golden Boy," the last of the great number 10s, the one who played with the lightness of one who knew he was unique, who made time stop with a single touch. Two distant worlds, almost opposite, yet bound by the same love for that Azzurri shirt that was a second skin for both.

Imagine them there, before a match that doesn't exist, in a dressing room that could be Coverciano or could be an old Sunday stadium. Rivera is already sitting, with that elegance that time has not scratched, his white hair and the gaze of one who has seen generations of footballers born and die. Chiellini enters, heavy as one who has carried the weight of a thousand battles on his shoulders, but with something different in his eyes. Perhaps it's that respect one has for grandparents when they tell stories of a world that no longer exists.

He sits down next to him. Silence, for a moment, fills the room.

"Presidente" – Chiellini's voice is a whisper, because Rivera, for all those who know, is always the Presidente. "I know we play tonight. I know I have to do my job, hold firm, not let anyone through. But before anything else, I'd like to understand something. My father, when I was little, always talked about you. He said: 'Giorgio, Rivera never ran, but he always arrived first. Rivera never slid in, but he never lost a tackle.' How do you do it? How can you be like that without even seeming to try?"

Rivera smiles. It's not the smile of someone who has the answer ready, but of someone who has searched for those answers inside for a lifetime. He adjusts his glasses, the ones he now also wears off the field, and speaks with that voice that seems to come from afar.

"Giorgio, I didn't have to run. The ball ran for me. You just had to understand a second before where it was going to end up. It's not a matter of legs, it's a matter of head. You, for example, were always there, fighting, getting your shirt dirty. I always admired those like you. Because while I was thinking about the play, you were thinking about me. And without you, my plays would have just been circus tricks."

Chiellini listens like a child listening to bedtime stories. Every word goes inside and stays there.

"You know, Presidente, I spent my life studying those like you. Those who erase you with a touch, who see passes we mere mortals can't even imagine. Before every important match, I would close my eyes and try to get into my opponent's head. What will he think? Where will he go? What's his weak point? But with true number 10s, those like you, it was impossible. Because they have no weak point. They only have genius. And genius can't be studied, it's endured."

Rivera's gaze wanders far away, as if at that moment he were seeing again the old fields, the old tackles, the old defenders who tried to stop him by fair means or foul.

"You know, Giorgio, I was lucky to play in a different era. There was more space for fantasy, more patience. Today you are perfect machines, organized, prepared. But sometimes I wonder: where has unpredictability gone? Where are the kids who try a nutmeg even though they know they'll get a kick? You modern defenders are physically stronger, but we... we had the courage to try things you can't even dream of."

Chiellini smiles, but it's a bitter smile, of one who knows those words are true.

"You're right, Presidente. Sometimes I think football has lost a bit of its soul. I spent my life studying attackers, but the greatest, the ones who drove me crazy, were precisely those who couldn't be studied. Those who did something different from what you had prepared. Those like you. And then, in those moments, you could only hope. Hope they made a mistake, or that the post would bail you out."

"And when we didn't make mistakes?" – asks Rivera, with a flash of that malice that must have driven defenders crazy half a world over.

"When you didn't make mistakes, Presidente, all that was left was the gesture. Clap your hands, get up, and start again. Because you were stronger, and you knew it. And we, in our own small way, knew we had honored the match. That we had given everything. And in the end, even if we had lost, we could look at you and say: 'Today I played against the greatest.' And that, for someone like me, was worth almost as much as a victory."

Rivera reaches out a hand and places it on Chiellini's shoulder. A simple, almost paternal gesture, as if at that moment the roles had been reversed and it was he, the old champion, wanting to protect the

warrior.

"Giorgio, I always thought that defenders like you were the true heroes. Because while we were getting applause, you were getting kicks. While we were scoring, you were getting back up. Without you, our genius would have had no meaning. You were our counterbalance, our challenge, our reason to be better. And in this, we were equals. In this, we always understood each other."

Football and poetry. Prose and fantasy. Two ways of being Italian, two ways of loving the same game. And in that dressing room that smells of history, for a moment, time stops.

Then Chiellini stands up, grips the captain's armband on his arm, and looks at Rivera with shining eyes.

"Presidente, on the pitch tonight I'll do my duty. As I've always done. But if by chance, in a corner of my head, I hear your voice saying 'watch out, I'm going past you,' I hope I have the strength to laugh about it. Because I know that, even if I were to lose that duel, I will have lost to football. To poetry. And there's no shame in that. No shame in losing to those who invented football."

Rivera also stands. Their eyes meet, and in that silent exchange there is everything: the awareness of having lived in two different eras, two different ways of understanding football, but united by something deeper. Love for this shirt. Love for this history. Love for this idea of what Italian football was, and perhaps one day will be again.

"Go, Giorgio. And remember: football is made of duels. You've won many, I've won many. But in the end, the only true winner is the one who played with his heart. And you, you never forgot that. Not even in the toughest moments. Not even when it seemed like all was lost."

As Chiellini crosses the threshold to the pitch, he turns one last time. Rivera is still there, motionless, with that faint smile that seems to guard the secrets of a hundred matches, a thousand nights, an entire era. And in that distant gaze, in that silence that speaks more than a thousand words, is the certainty that football is made of men, before champions. Of stories, before trophies. Of memories, before goals.

Two ways of being Italian. Two ways of loving the same game. Two ways of simply saying, thank you.

11.

Now we get to the heart of the matter. Who were these fantasisti we've talked about, whom we dreamed of, admired, to the point of imagining hypothetical conversations between them and the best defenders in the world?

{1} Giuseppe Meazza

Let's try to listen to the silence. Let's try to strain our ears towards that past that is no more, but which continues to speak to us through the walls of San Siro, through the air of Milan, through those faded photographs where a man with an elegant bearing, hair shiny with brilliantine, and a proud look, seems to challenge time itself. Giuseppe Meazza. "Peppìn." "Balilla." The first, the greatest, the architect of an idea of football that didn't exist before him and that everyone after him has tried to imitate, without ever truly equaling.

But what thought, what soul, what philosophy of life and game lay behind those lively, intelligent eyes? To answer, to at least try to approach the mystery, we have to step back in time. We have to try to listen to his voice, which today reaches us through the tales of those who were lucky enough to see him play, through the words of the great journalists who celebrated him as a pagan god of the ball, through the legend that continues to breathe every time someone passes through the gates of that stadium that bears his name, almost as if on a secular pilgrimage to an altar of memories.

Meazza didn't like abstract definitions, labels, the categorizations that journalists and fans love to stitch onto champions. He, the boy born between Porta Romana and Porta Vittoria in Milan, the man who invented Italian football before Italian football even knew it existed, lived the game in a much simpler and yet much deeper way. For him, being a fantasista wasn't a tactical role, it wasn't a position to occupy in a formation. It was a way of being in the world. A disposition of the soul. A way of breathing, of moving, of looking at life and the ball with the same amazed and yet cunning eyes.

Born on the street, in that melting pot of humanity that was the working-class Milan of the early twentieth century, with a ball made of rags and a dream as big as the city that saw him grow up amid the noise of trams and the voices of the market. He learned football there, on the hard pavement, through dribbling and improvised inventions, with walls as teammates and passers-by as an audience. There were no masters, no patterns to memorize. There was only him, the ball, and that irrepressible desire to amaze, to do something no one had ever seen, to leave everyone who stopped to watch speechless. And perhaps this is his greatest lesson, the one we should keep carved in our hearts: that true talent is born on the street, from absolute freedom, from imagination without limits or barriers. It is born from play, before work.

Rejected by Milan because he was too slender, too skinny to be a footballer. Think about this episode, this colossal mistake that still makes you smile for its shortsightedness. The Rossoneri looked at that kid, thin as a nail, and saw nothing. Their eyes stopped at the surface, at the flesh, at the physique that seemed to promise nothing. Inter, on

the other hand, had the intelligence to look beyond, to see what normal eyes couldn't grasp: genius. And so, at fourteen, Meazza joined the Nerazzurri boys, and the rest, as they say, is history. History that is still told today, history that still makes hearts beat.

When Árpád Weisz, the Hungarian coach who had the intuition to launch him, made him debut in the first team at seventeen, an older teammate, Leopoldo Conti, burst out with that joke that would become legend: "Now we even have to play with the balilla (toy soldiers)." With the kids, with those who still played with toy soldiers. And from that day on, the nickname "Balilla" stuck to him like a habit. But Meazza, in that debut match, scored three goals. Three. And he never stopped doing it, Sunday after Sunday, season after season.

What was his idea of football? What deep thought guided his plays? Better than any words, it's told by his way of scoring, what the chroniclers of the time, with an expression that smacks of poetry, called the "goal by invitation." Meazza would arrive in front of the goalkeeper, often alone, and instead of shooting immediately, instead of finishing with fury, he would almost stop. He would slow down, look the poor goalkeeper in the eyes, invite him to come out with a movement of his body, and just when that wretch decided to move, to dive, to try everything, he would mock him with a precise, lethal touch, almost cruel in its disarming simplicity. It wasn't just a technical gesture, it wasn't just skill. It was a declaration of absolute superiority. It was the genius saying, without words: "I know what you will do before you know it yourself. I read your mind. And I will always, always, be one step ahead of you."

He was a man who loved life in all its forms, never holding back. The women, beautiful and numerous, the fast cars that sped through the streets of Milan, the brilliantine that kept his hair always in perfect order, the nights spent in clubs having fun, laughing, simply being Peppìn. It is said, and legend feeds on these anecdotes, that one Sunday he showed up at the stadium with the warm-up already underway, after a night of revelry spent dancing and enjoying life, and scored a hat-trick as if nothing had happened. Because geniuses, as we know, can afford to be a little unruly. Because talent, when it is so immense, so rooted in the soul, always finds a way to manifest itself, no matter what.

Yet, and this is perhaps the most fascinating aspect, there was also another soul in Meazza. That of the serious professional when needed, when the situation demanded it. That of the man who, on Weisz's

advice, diligently worked to improve his left foot, the weaker one, because "a great footballer must have both feet." That of the captain who led Italy to two consecutive World Cup victories in 1934 and 1938, with that armband that seemed a natural extension of his body. That of the player who, after an illness that risked having his foot amputated, a chilling prospect for a footballer, returned to the field and continued to score as if nothing had happened.

Gianni Brera, the greatest Italian sports journalist, the man who could do extraordinary things with words, told it like this, in an obituary that even today, reading it, sends chills down your spine and brings tears to your eyes: "Great players existed in the world, perhaps tougher and more consistent than him, but it didn't seem to us that one could go beyond his sudden inventions, his brilliant bursts, his peremptory yet never mocking dribbles, his solitary flights towards his ever-lost victim, the opposing goalkeeper."

In these words, there is everything. There is the sudden invention, the one you cannot prepare, cannot train. There is the brilliant burst, the one that starts from the head before the legs. There is the peremptory, decisive dribble, but never mocking, never humiliating towards the opponent. And there is that solitary, almost melancholic flight towards the goalkeeper, his "ever-lost victim." As if Meazza, in those moments, were alone in the world, with only that poor wretch in front of him, trying in vain to defend the goal.

This was his idea of football. This was his deep, instinctive, visceral idea of what it means to be a fantasista. Not a role to interpret, not a position on the tactical chessboard, but a way of being in the world. The ability to invent what no one had yet imagined, to create from nothing, like a painter in front of a blank canvas. The strength to always amaze, match after match, year after year, without ever repeating oneself, without ever becoming predictable. The elegance to do it with style, with that innate class that only true champions possess, that class that cannot be learned, cannot be bought, that comes from within.

Perhaps, his deepest thought, his true philosophy, he left us without even knowing it, without ever putting it in writing, simply by living football as he lived it: with the pure joy of a child playing in the street, with the proud awareness of a champion who knows he is the best, with the lightness of one who never takes himself too seriously, of one who knows that in the end it's just a game, wonderful but still a game. Because Meazza, deep down, despite the trophies, despite the goals,

despite the fame, had remained that kid from Porta Vittoria chasing a rag ball through the streets of Milan.

And when today we enter the stadium that bears his name, at San Siro, in that cauldron of emotions that has seen generations of champions pass through, we should stop for a moment and remember that it is not just a monument of reinforced concrete and bricks, not just an arena for the spectacle of modern football. It is much more. It is the temple where fantasy first found a home. It is the sacred place where Giuseppe Meazza, the first true Italian fantasista, the inventor of a way of playing, continues to live in every dribble, in every goal, in every invention that today's players try to give us. Because poetry, true poetry, never dies. It transforms, changes face, changes name, but continues to live. And he, Giuseppe Meazza, was its greatest poet that Italian football has ever known.

{2} Valentino Mazzola

Valentino Mazzola: The Captain Who Had Football in His Blood

If you're looking for a football story that sticks to you and never lets go, you need to know Valentino Mazzola. He wasn't "a footballer." He was much more: a force of nature, a true leader, a visionary who played football as if he had seen twenty years ahead what would happen. And above all, he was the beating heart of the strongest team Italy has ever had. His life seems like a movie: legendary victories, deep friendships, and a tragic ending that left a huge void throughout the country.

The Genius on the Pitch: Why No One Was Like Him

Mazzola was the perfect mix: physique, technique, head, and almost magical charisma. He didn't just play: he rewrote the rules of the game.

1. A Perfect Athlete: On the pitch, Mazzola was a giant. He had the stamina of a marathon runner and the sprint of a 100-meter runner. For 90 minutes, he ran over every inch of grass, impossible to move in duels, yet light as air in motion. And then that shot… legendary stuff. A real "cannon blast" that came from both feet and left goalkeepers petrified, with the net still trembling. From distance or in tight spaces, his power was always surgical.

2. The Touch of an Artist: If his physique was intimidating, his touch was enchanting. Mazzola tamed the ball with a caress, even when the

pass was awkward. Dribbling? An elegant feint, a sharp burst, and away he went: he didn't just beat his man, he made him disappear. He seemed like a dancer with the grit of a Gascon. But his true masterpiece was the pass. He had an endless repertoire: long, diagonal balls that changed the game in an instant, or those through balls precise as a scalpel, that pierced defenses. With Ezio Loik, his brother on the pitch, it was pure telepathy. He thought the pass, Loik turned it into a goal.

3. The Tactical Brain: Long before anyone talked about the "total footballer," Valentino Mazzola already was one. He was the brain of the team. One moment you'd see him deep, dictating the tempo and imposing the rhythm; the next he was already in the box, finishing the move he himself had invented. They called him "the libero of the attack." He read the game three moves ahead, slipping into spaces that didn't yet exist. He was the engine, the steering wheel, and the fuel, all in one.

4. A True Captain: His feet were the instrument, but his heart was the baton. Mazzola didn't lead with words: he led with actions, with his face, with his muscles. His most famous gesture? When the team was in trouble, he would roll up his sleeves. He wouldn't say anything, but it was a shout: "Guys, now we'll take it back." That was enough. His grit was contagious, his courage limitless. Someone once said the most beautiful phrase about him: "To play football, heart isn't enough. You need the heart of Valentino Mazzola." He didn't ask for 100%. He wanted 110%. And he always gave that first.

What Remains: More Than a Memory

On May 4, 1949, Superga extinguished everything. Valentino left at the highest moment of his life, at just 30 years old. And he left us with that question that will never have an answer: how much more could he have done, how great would he have been? But a tragedy does not erase a giant.

Today, Valentino Mazzola is not just a page in a book. He is the eternal symbol of the Grande Torino, the immortal Captain who never really left. His story lives on in the deafening silence of Superga, in the DNA of Italian football, and in the footsteps of his son Sandro, who carried that name and that courage forward with pride, to the stars.

This is the story of a man who, with his talent and his enormous heart, became forever the heartbeat of Italian football.

{3} Juan Alberto Schiaffino

Juan Alberto Schiaffino: The Genius Who Brought Total Football to Italy

When Juan Alberto Schiaffino crossed the gates of San Siro in 1954, Milan and Serie A weren't simply acquiring a champion. They had just gotten their hands on something much rarer: an architect of the game, a man capable of seeing the match before it happened. To understand what Schiaffino brought to our league, we have to look beyond the numbers – 149 appearances and 47 goals for the Rossoneri – and immerse ourselves in his idea of football.

The Mind: A Radar Instead of a Brain

Cesare Maldini, who shared the dressing room with him, recounted it with a phrase that has gone down in history: "He had a radar instead of a brain." This was his most extraordinary gift. Schiaffino didn't run aimlessly: he interpreted the game three moves ahead, positioning

himself where the ball would arrive, not where it was at that moment. In a football still dominated by power and man-marking, he played with intelligence and geometry.

He wasn't a sprinter, he wasn a dragoon. He was a long-limbed man, with an apparently slender physique, who seemed to move in slow motion while everyone else elbowed their way. Yet, anyone who tried to press him would systematically come out broken. The tough Scotsman Tommy Docherty, who marked him in Uruguay's 7-0 win over Scotland in 1954, called him without hesitation "the greatest player I ever faced." He recounted thinking he had him trapped on the byline, only to see him vanish like a ghost and reappear behind him.

The Technique: Soft, Lethal, Perfect

His left foot would deserve a chapter of its own. It wasn't the foot of a bomber, he didn't seek spectacular efforts. Schiaffino shot with millimeter precision, with an almost deceptive gentleness that turned the ball into a remote-controlled projectile. His shots didn't make the net tremble: they kissed it, with a trajectory studied to perfection.

But the real masterpiece was the passing. Schiaffino distributed play like an orchestra conductor: short to keep possession, long to switch play, through to pierce defenses. He was the advanced playmaker, what we would now call a playmaker, but with an innate ability to make runs and shoot. In an era of rigid roles, he was the first total footballer that Serie A had ever seen: he built, he set up, he finished.

The Impact: A Silent Revolutionary

When he arrived at Milan, the Rossoneri already had the mythical Gre-No-Li, the Swedish trio formed by Gunnar Gren, Gunnar Nordahl, and Nils Liedholm. Schiaffino didn't overlap: he integrated, becoming the missing piece to transform a great team into a scudetto-winning machine.

He won three championships (1955, 1957, 1959) and a Latin Cup in 1956, the forerunner of today's Champions League. In 1958, he took Milan to within a step of the European throne, scoring the goal for the momentary lead in the Brussels final against the star-studded Real Madrid. It ended 3-2 for the Spaniards after extra time, but Schiaffino had demonstrated that Italian football could compete with the sacred monsters.

The Second Life: The Philosopher Libero

In 1960, at 35, Schiaffino moved to Roma. Here, yet another magic occurred. From offensive playmaker, he transformed into a libero, redesigning the role from the back. With the same elegance with which he had invented play in midfield, he now set it up from defense, with vision and technical cleanliness. With him and Ghiggia, he won another European trophy – the Fairs Cup in 1961 – demonstrating that true talent doesn't age, it adapts.

What Remains

Schiaffino brought a revolutionary concept to Serie A: football is played first with the head, then with the feet. In a league historically devoted to hard work and defensive tactics, he taught that you could also win by dancing. Not coincidentally, FIFA included him in the ideal team of the 1950 World Cup, and IFFHS consecrated him as the greatest Uruguayan ever and the 17th overall of the 20th century.

Today, when we see a midfielder dictating the tempo with a touch, reading the space before the movement, not wasting a useless run, we are looking at a trace of Juan Alberto Schiaffino. The first, true, inimitable brain of Italian football.

Schiaffino e Rivera

{4} Omar Sívori

Stepping away a bit from the subject to remember something

Max Stirner and Omar Sívori: When the Philosopher Meets the

Champion

Listen, I have to tell you something. My uncle, God rest his soul, was a tough guy. From La Spezia, many years ago. And he had two great loves in life, almost two obsessions. The first was this German philosopher, Max Stirner, one who said things like "the Unique" and "the own self." Stuff that if you swallow it all, you become a public danger. And the second was Omar Sívori.

Back then, I was a kid and this Stirner seemed like a nerd to me, while Sívori was this crazy guy doing nutmegs. Then the years passed, I'm the same age my uncle was when he told me about him, and I'm starting to understand.

This Stirner said a very simple thing: the world is full of "spooks," of fixed ideas – the Fatherland, Duty, the Team, Success – that want to possess us. They turn us into someone else's property: property of the club, property of the fans, property of tactics. He instead said: you are your own, you are unique, you don't have to serve anything or anyone. You must use the world for your creativity, for your flame.

All my life I've heard the name Omar Sívori but with little chance to watch him in action.

Omar Sívori: When the Fantasista Had a Dirty Face and the Touch of a King

Omar Sívori wasn't a fantasista. He was **the** fantasista. The perfect one. The one that even today, when you draw a number 10 on the whiteboard, without knowing it you're sketching his face.

Sivori, Charles e Boniperti

But be careful: when we say "perfect," we're not talking about the one who always made the right choice. That's a playmaker, a brain, maybe even a champion. Sívori was something else. The perfect fantasista isn't the one who makes the fewest mistakes. It's the one who dares the most.

And he dared. Always. On every ball, in every corner of the field, against every defender he came across. Because the fantasista, the real one, isn't afraid of making mistakes. He's afraid of going unnoticed.

The Body: A Target, a Challenge, a Manifesto

Let's start with the image, because Sívori already spoke through his kit.

Socks rolled down. No shin guards. Knees exposed.

Today, a kid in youth leagues shows up like that and the coach benches him immediately. "You're reckless, you'll get hurt, you don't respect the game." Not Sívori. Sívori would say: "Here are my shins.

Hit here. If you can."

That wasn't a look. It was a statement. The fantasista doesn't ask for protection. The fantasista challenges the world to stop him. And if the world tries, he gets past it. Again. And again. Until the opponent gives up, exhausted, humiliated, convinced that maybe it's time to change professions.

The Talent: The Nutmeg as a Signature, the Dribble as a Declaration of Love

Then there was the game. His left foot.

Sívori's left wasn't a foot: it was a brush, a whip, a scalpel. With it, he could do everything: cross, shoot, control, provoke. But his real specialty was the nutmeg.

Omar Sívori didn't do nutmegs because they were needed. He did them because it was his way of telling you that you were inferior. There was no malice, perhaps. There was the awareness of a king who grants you the honor of meeting his gaze, before passing the ball between your legs and leaving you there, with the stupid air of someone who has just realized they've ended up in the wrong circus.

And he never stopped at the first one. If he could, he would repeat the nutmeg two, three times on the same opponent. Because the fantasista isn't cruel, no. The fantasista is generous: he gives you the chance to improve. You make a mistake, he tries again. In the end, if you're lucky, you learn.

The Character: A Vice, a Trouble, a Blessing

Gianni Agnelli, who knew about football and style, said the most beautiful phrase about him: "Sívori is not a champion. He is a vice."

A vice. That is, something you know is bad for you, that leads you astray, that isn't rational. But which you can't give up.

There you have it, the perfect fantasista is exactly this: the vice of football. The one you look at from the bench and say, "If I play him, maybe I'll lose balance." And then you play him anyway. Because without him, Sunday is greyer, lunch is blander, life is more boring.

Sívori argued with everyone. Referees, opponents, teammates, presidents, coaches. Especially coaches. Heriberto Herrera, who at Juve wanted to make him run like everyone else, became his personal enemy. Sívori fought him with shots at the bench, with insults, with

theatrical ejections. Because the fantasista doesn't run on the coach's orders. He runs when the ball tells him: "Come get me."

33 match bans in his career. But 135 goals in Italy. And a huge number of defenders who even today, as old men, wake up at night and see that ball passing between their legs.

The Exhibition: That Minute at San Siro, the Perfect Synthesis

And then there's that anecdote. Inter-Juve, they were down 2-0, they come back. Stacchini makes it 2-2, gets the ball and starts juggling. The crowd applauds. Sívori, on the other side of the field, sees his teammate stealing the scene. And he gets jealous.

He calls for the ball. Stacchini passes it to him. And for a minute, at San Siro, with forty thousand people watching, the two exchange the ball without a Nerazzurri player touching it.

This is the perfect fantasista. Not the one who wins. The one who takes the stage. The one who turns eleven opponents into eleven extras. The one who for sixty seconds makes you understand that football is not just a result: it's spectacle, it's provocation, it's art.

The newspapers of the time don't report that minute. The chronicles focus on the result, the goals, the points. But Stacchini still tells it today, fifty years later, with his eyes shining. Because that minute, for those who were there, remained more vivid than any scudetto.

The Legacy: The Fantasista That Won't Return

Today, when we talk about number 10s, we always say the same thing. "There are no more fantasisti like before." It's a refrain, almost a litany.

But maybe it's true. Because the fantasista isn't just a matter of talent. It's a matter of personality. Of boldness. Of recklessness.

Sívori was all this. He was the kid who scored six goals against Inter and the next day said: "I could have scored seven." He was the man who refused shin guards because "I'm faster than anyone who wants to hit me anyway." He was the champion who at the end of his career,

ill, returned to his Argentina and watched Maradona on television saying: "Finally someone who entertains me."

The perfect fantasista doesn't train. He performs. He doesn't sacrifice himself. He exalts himself. He doesn't apologize. He asks for the ball.

And Omar Sívori, with those rolled-down socks and that damned left foot, spent his entire life asking for the ball. And almost always, he got it.

For this reason, when we talk about him, we cannot use the past tense. Because Sívori didn't die in 2005, at seventy, in a clinic in San Nicolás. He is still there, at San Siro, in the middle of the field, exchanging the ball with Stacchini while Inter runs through the air.

And they'll never touch it, that ball.

Because it was his. Always.

You can't talk about Omar Sívori like a normal footballer. Because he wasn't normal at all. He was a character, a Gascon, a cursed genius with his socks always down and the ball seemingly glued to his left foot.

Let me tell you a few stories. Stuff that if a screenwriter invented it, people would say "no way, that's exaggerated." But it's not. It's all true.

That Time He Scored Six Against Inter (And Still Wasn't Happy)

Let's start here. June 10, 1961. Juventus-Inter ends 9-1. Yes, you read that right: 9-1. Sívori scores six. Six goals in one match, stuff not even in table football.

Now, a normal person after a match like that wakes up the next day, reads the papers and smiles. Not him. He was Sívori. The next year, in the first leg, Inter marks him tightly, sticks to him like a shadow, and he scores "only" two goals. At the end of the match, he walks past the Inter bench, looks at Heriberto Herrera (who would later become his sworn enemy) and says: "Last year you were lucky. Today I couldn't be bothered."

The Duel with HH2: Shots at the Bench and Rogue Threats

And yes, Heriberto Herrera. Called HH2 to avoid confusion with Helenio. He arrives at Juve in '64 and has an idea of football opposite to Sívori's. Herrera wants pressing, movement without the ball, discipline. Sívori wants the ball there, at his feet, and then he'll

manage.

They're like oil and vinegar. After a year of arguments, Sívori is sold to Napoli. But the story doesn't end there.

Dino Zoff, who was at Napoli at the time, says that every time Juventus and Napoli met, Sívori spent the match shooting the ball at the bench. On purpose. Herrera was there, Sívori would pretend to cross and bang, ball straight at the coach's face. "If I wanted to, really, I would have killed him," Omar would say. And he had that face, halfway between serious and mocking, that you couldn't tell if he was joking or planning something.

The best chapter? Juventus-Napoli in 1968. A very heated match, Sívori sent off. As he leaves the pitch, he passes in front of Herrera, stops, looks him straight in the eye and shouts: "On the way back, in Turin, we'll come to play with six. That's enough to beat you." Six men, against eleven. Because he was convinced that half a team was enough.

The Nutmeg and Rolled-Down Socks: "Hit Here, If You Can"

Sívori is the inventor of the nutmeg in Italy. Not in the sense that no one had ever done it, but in the sense that he made it an art form. He looked for it, provoked it. After beating an opponent, sometimes he would stop, wait for him, and do the nutmeg on him again. For fun. Because the public liked it.

And then those socks. Always rolled down below the knee, bunched around the ankle. No shin guards. An open challenge to anyone who wanted to hit him: "Here, hit here. If you can." A gesture that was already a dribble before the ball even started rolling.

A vice. That is, something you know is bad for you, that leads you astray, that isn't rational. But which you can't give up. Perfect.

They called him "El Cabezón" – literally "big head." Because he had a big head, sure, but also because he was as stubborn as few. One who on the pitch argued with everyone, opponents, referees, teammates, benches. 33 match bans in his career. Yet when he touched the ball, the world stopped.

Years later, now far from the fields, they ask him who the greatest was. He had seen Pelé, he had seen Di Stéfano, he had seen Cruijff. And he says: "No one entertained me as much as Maradona."

One of the greatest number 10s in history, a rebel genius who made

dribbling his signature, gets in line and says: "He was stronger." Chapeau.

That Day Zoff Broke Two of His Ribs (And He Never Forgave Him)

Little gem. 1964, Sívori is at Juve, Dino Zoff plays for Mantova. Goalkeeper comes out low, knee against ribcage, two ribs fractured. It happens.

But Sívori, furious, wasn't angry about the injury. He was angry because the match was 1-1, ten minutes left, and Zoff had forced him to be carried off on a stretcher into Herrera's arms. "Dino, you made me leave the field in the arms of the Paraguayan. I will never forgive you."

He held it against him for years. Jokingly, perhaps. Or perhaps not.

What Remains

Omar Sívori died in 2005, at seventy. Pancreatic cancer took him away in his San Nicolás, in Argentina, where he had wanted to return to live.

But here in Italy, when a kid tries a nutmeg and succeeds, when a fantasista takes the ball and says "now I'll do it," when a player provokes the defender and then beats him with a feint… well, in some way, Sívori is still there.

One who scored six goals against Inter and wasn't happy. Who shot the ball at the coach's bench. Who played without shin guards because he was faster than anyone who wanted to hit him.

A genius. A vice. The last pirate of Italian football.

Sivori e Bearzot

{5} Gianni Rivera

Let's stop for an instant. Just an instant. Let's close our eyes and let our hearts guide us, like when you walk barefoot on a road you've always known. Do you feel that air? It's the Italy of the past, the one told in black and white, the one of slow Sundays spent with an ear glued to the radio or eyes fixed on that small screen that warmed the dark corner of the living room. And there, in the middle of that green field that seemed like a stage suspended between heaven and earth, he was there. Gianni Rivera. The number 10. That shirt, heavy as an oath, seemed drawn on his skin, tailored by a seamstress who knew the secret of elegance better than anyone.

The world called him "Golden Boy," the golden boy, because everything he touched seemed to light up. They called him "Bambino d'oro" for that boyish appearance, that clean face that seemed to come from an old family photograph kept in the drawer of dearest memories. And then there was "l'Abatino," that nickname that Gianni Brera, with his sharp and yet affectionate irony, had given him as one gives a secret. Because Rivera had something ethereal, almost ascetic, an apparent fragility that deceived everyone like a mirage. He seemed like a skinny kid who had ended up by chance among those giants of football. But beneath that delicate surface, beneath that shy smile that seemed to apologize for being there, beat the heart of a gentle warrior. Of one who didn't need to break opponents' legs because he erased them with his gaze, with an imperceptible movement, with a thought that ran faster than their bodies.

Born in Alessandria in that August of 1943, in an Italy struggling to rise from the rubble of war, Rivera seemed to have arrived from another world. A world where football wasn't just effort and sweat, but grace and invention, poetry and lightness. At fifteen years, nine months, and fifteen days, he stepped onto the Serie A pitch for the first time. Against Inter, as it happens. As if to say: let's throw ourselves right into the fray, let's challenge the strongest right away. And already at that moment, you knew he wasn't a kid like the others. At sixteen, Milan took him away from his Alessandria for a sum that then seemed pure folly: 130 million lire. A sum that made your wrists tremble, a crazy investment for a sixteen-year-old. And immediately they placed the number 10 on his shoulders, the one that had belonged to Schiaffino, to a champion who had written pages of history. A weight that would have crushed any youngster. He, instead, seemed not even to notice. As if that shirt had been waiting for him forever. As if destiny had intertwined his name with that number long before he came into the world.

Then came Nereo Rocco, "il Paròn." A man from another time, hard as

rock, demanding as a general, who had an almost military conception of football. He demanded sacrifice from everyone, even the greatest. Everyone had to run, everyone had to sweat, everyone had to track back and defend. It was Rocco's law, and it wasn't questioned. But with Rivera, he made an exception. And this, in a man like Rocco, is the greatest of confessions, the admission that before genius one must bow. He understood that certain talents cannot be bridled, that certain creative souls need to breathe. He understood that if he forced Rivera to run like the others, he would forever extinguish that light. And so, while the full-backs man-marked and the midfielders ran up and down the flanks like damned souls, Rivera was allowed to roam. To find his space. To be free. He was the first "offensive playmaker," the first "fantasista" before that word even existed. And he repaid that trust with gestures that seemed to come from a fairy tale book.

But what, really, was his secret? His greatest gift? Difficult, almost impossible to say. Perhaps it was his vision of the game. Rivera saw first. He saw the corridor opening in an apparently impenetrable defense. He saw the movement of a teammate that no one else had noticed. He saw the play that others would imagine only a second later, when it was already too late. His assists were poetry drawn with his foot. Pierino Prati, Angelo Sormani, the great strikers of those years, are forever grateful to him: from that "magic little foot" came suggestions that it was almost a crime not to turn into goals. And when needed, when the team needed him, he also scored. 122 goals in 501 matches for Milan. Numbers that for a midfielder are out of this world. But it wasn't the quantity, it was the quality. It was that way of striking the ball as if caressing it, as if between his foot and the leather there was a secret understanding, a complicity that no one could comprehend, a silent dialogue that only the two of them knew.

Then came 1969. The year of consecration, the year the world realized that Italy could produce genius. After leading Milan to victory in the European Cup against Cruijff's Ajax, that 4-1 in Madrid which even today, thinking back, seems like an epic feat, one of those fairy tales told to children to make them fall asleep dreaming, Rivera received the Ballon d'Or. He was the first Italian to win that award. And that statuette wasn't just a personal recognition, it was much more. It was the triumph of talent over power. It was the victory of fantasy over discipline. It was the genius taking the stage and saying to the world: "Here, football can also be this, it can be art, it can be beauty." That Ballon d'Or weighed like a boulder, but he lifted it with the same lightness with which he lifted a ball, with that shy smile that seemed to say "it's nothing."

But Rivera's story is also a story of divisions, of dualities, of an Italy that couldn't choose. In the National team, his name was linked to that of Sandro Mazzola. Two champions, two opposite ways of understanding football, the same role. And the coach Valcareggi, to avoid displeasing anyone, invented the "staffetta" (relay). One half Mazzola, one half Rivera. A compromise solution that smacked of fear of choosing, of shyness before greatness. And perhaps, who knows, that choice cost us the World Cup in 1970. In the final against Brazil, in Mexico City, Rivera came on too late, when Pelé and his team had already taken the lead. And while the Brazilians lifted the cup, he watched from afar, with those eyes that seemed to ask: "What if...?" A question that will remain forever suspended in the air of that Mexican stadium. But in that same edition, his moment had arrived. In the semi-final against Germany, the "match of the century," his shot at the end of extra time made it 4-3, sending Italy to the final. A goal that the Germans have never forgotten, that even today, decades later, makes you dream again. That match, that goal, are the essence of Rivera: the man who decides in the moments that count, who doesn't hide, who takes the ball and puts it where no one can get it, who transforms anguish into joy, despair into hope.

He was a man of duels, Rivera. With Eusébio, with Cruijff, with those

giants who made the history of world football. But they were clean duels, made of intelligence and technique, never of malice. He represented an idea of finally offensive football, in perpetual struggle with the Italian school that privileged defense and counter-attack. His attacks on those coaches who, with their defensive choices, took strength and dynamism away from offensive play, have become legendary. He was the inspirer, the prophet of a different football. One who said: "We can also attack, we can also entertain, we can also make people dream." And he wasn't afraid to say it, even when everyone around him preached prudence and sacrifice, even when it seemed easier to stay quiet and accept.

But what did Gianni Rivera think about being a fantasista? He, perhaps, didn't even like definitions. Because when you are like that, when football is your breath, your reason for living, you don't need labels. Simply, he played as he breathed. Naturally, with elegance, with that lightness that only true geniuses have. Those who don't even seem to try, those who make everything seem easy, even the most impossible play, even the most daring pass. In a football that was becoming increasingly physical, increasingly organized, increasingly a precision machine, he was the man who invented, who created, who surprised. He was the unforeseen, the mad variable that no scheme could predict, the lightning that tore through the grey sky of tactics.

His thought, today, we carry inside us as a precious legacy. As a testament left to those who will come after, to those who will have the courage to pick up that baton. That football, before being a result, is an emotion. That beauty, sometimes, counts more than substance. That an assist, a dribble, an improvised play can be worth more than a hundred runs without the ball. That people's hearts are won not with victories, but with dreams. And he, of dreams, gave thousands, millions, to entire generations who even today, when they hear his

name, smile like children.

Marco van Basten, one who understood football, one who did extraordinary things with Milan, said of him a phrase that even today gives you chills, that even today runs down your spine like a sudden shiver: "I am just a small fragment of Milan's history, Rivera is eternal." Eternal. Think about this word. Think about what it means. It means he never dies, he remains there, in time, immutable like a monument, like a statue that the wind cannot scratch. Rivera is eternal because poetry never dies. Results are forgotten, trophies gather dust in the dark corners of museums, photographs yellow in old albums. But poetry remains. It remains in gestures, in memories, in that feeling that takes you when you think back to one of his plays and realize your eyes are still moist, your heart still beats like it did that distant day.

And so, if today we close our eyes and think of Gianni Rivera, we don't just see a footballer. We see an idea. We see the hope that football can be art, that beauty can triumph, that an apparently fragile boy can become the strongest of all. We see that number 10 running lightly on the grass of the Italian championship, and we seem to still hear the roar of the stadium, the roar of the crowd, that unique feeling that only great champions can give, that emotion that grips your throat and never lets go.

Gianni Rivera. The last of the poets. The first of dreams. The one who taught us that football, in the end, is just a pretext to fly.

{6} Sandro Mazzola

Let's stop for a moment. Let memories surface gently, like when you leaf through an old album of photographs yellowed by time. What man, what player, what story lies behind the name Sandro Mazzola? To truly tell it, to feel him close, you must take a journey. Go back, to that Italy of the sixties discovering the economic miracle and learning to dream finally in color, after so much black and white. And he was there, in the middle of that green field, with that Nerazzurri shirt that seemed not simply worn, but drawn on his body, sewn together with his destiny. He was the son of art, the heir to a myth that seemed impossible to equal. The boy carrying on his shoulders the weight of an immense surname, a suitcase full of memories and expectations, and instead of bending under that burden, found the strength to become a legend himself, with his own legs, with his own heart.

The story of Sandro Mazzola doesn't begin with a ball happily rolling on a meadow. It begins with a tragedy that marked Italian football forever, a wound that even today, decades later, has not fully healed.

His father, Valentino Mazzola, was the captain of the Grande Torino, that team that dominated Italy and made an entire country dream with its play, its strength, its humanity. On May 4, 1949, on the Superga hill, the plane bringing those boys home crashed into the basilica, in smoke and fog. There were no survivors. The great Torino no longer existed. Sandro was only six years old. From that day, the name Mazzola became something sacred and cursed at the same time. A flame to keep alive, but also a difficult weight to carry. An open wound in the heart of Italian football that time has never completely closed.

Growing up with that weight, with that so cumbersome shadow, was not easy. No one can understand what it means, except those who lived it. Sandro remembered the walks with his father through the streets of Turin, when people would stop to talk to him, to touch him as you touch a saint. He, a child, held Valentino's hand tightly, a little frightened by all those people, by all that love. Then, suddenly, the void. The silence. And that surname that remained there, like a promise to keep, like a legacy to honor with one's own life.

The family, with that grief tight in their throats, moved to Milan. And it was there, almost by magic, that destiny crossed Sandro's path with that of another myth, another piece of history: Giuseppe Meazza, "Peppìn." It was Meazza himself, while coaching the Inter boys, who discovered the talent of that skinny, determined kid, with eyes full of a special light. Under his guidance, Sandro refined his technique,

learned the secrets of the trade, absorbed that football culture that only the greats know how to transmit, almost by osmosis, with a gesture, with a glance.

His Serie A debut, in 1961, seems to come from a screenplay written by a mocking and cruel fate. Inter had to face Juventus in a play-off decided by the Federation, and president Moratti, in protest against that decision, sent in the Primavera youth team. The boys against the champions. Sandro, nineteen years old, found himself facing sacred monsters like Boniperti, Charles, and Sívori, players he had only seen in photographs or heard on the radio. It ended 9-1 for the Bianconeri, a humiliating defeat, one of those that mark you forever. But Mazzola, on that dark day, scored the only Nerazzurri goal, a penalty, with the courage of one who doesn't give up. And from that defeat, from that day that could have destroyed a boy, his legend began. From that moment, he never left Inter again. Until 1977, that shirt was his home.

Then came Helenio Herrera, "il Mago." With his catenaccio, his almost military discipline, his obsession with tactical perfection, he transformed Inter into the strongest team in the world, a war machine that frightened everyone. And in the heart of that perfect machine, in its most hidden engine, Sandro Mazzola was the man of fantasy, the unpredictable element. He was the atypical centre-forward, the attacker who would come short, drop deep only to burst forward again, who invented, who scored. "Catenaccio" wasn't just defense and destruction: it was a spring that loaded up to release, and Mazzola was the tip of that arrow, the venom that struck the heart of the opponents.

His main gift? It's difficult, almost impossible to say for sure. Perhaps it was the speed of thought, that rare ability to see before others the right moment to make a run, to strike. Perhaps it was the dribbling, dry, essential, never an extra feint, never a useless movement. Perhaps it was his goal-scoring instinct, that innate and mysterious gift of knowing where the ball will end up before it's even kicked, as if he had an invisible thread connecting him to the ball. In 1964, against Di Stéfano and Puskás's Real Madrid, in the European Cup final, he scored two goals. Two. At the end of the match, the great Puskás, a living legend, approached him and said words that still give you chills today: "I played against your father. You would have been his pride. I want to give you my shirt."

He was the top scorer in Serie A in 1965, with 17 goals, the only offensive midfielder to achieve that in an era dominated by pure and ruthless strikers. He won two European Cups, two Intercontinental Cups, four scudetti. His trophy cabinet is full of prizes that weigh like

boulders. And in 1971 he came second in the Ballon d'Or, behind only Johan Cruijff, the genius of total football, the flying Dutchman who enchanted the world. A second place worth a victory.

But Sandro Mazzola's story is also the story of a duality that divided Italy, that sparked endless discussions in bars and homes. With Gianni Rivera, his great rival from Milan, he shared the Azzurri shirt for years, in an alternation of hopes and disappointments. Two opposite ways of understanding football, two different life philosophies. Mazzola was movement, strength, insertion, the continuous search for space. Rivera was the pause, suspended time, the final pass, the play that invents from nothing. Coach Valcareggi, to avoid choosing, to avoid displeasing anyone, invented the "staffetta" (relay): one half Mazzola, one half Rivera. A compromise solution that smacked of fear, and which perhaps, who knows, cost us the World Cup in 1970.

Mazzola, however, didn't like to talk about rivalry. Those things, perhaps, he left to journalists, to fans, to those who need to take sides. He preferred to tell football as he lived it on his skin: with a heart beating fast, with the run that takes your breath away, with the simple and clean joy of one who feels free on the pitch, of one who forgets everything else. And when today, after so many years, he tells of those times, he does so with the calm voice of one who has seen history pass before his eyes, of one who was there, of one who lived every moment on his own skin.

But what did Sandro Mazzola think about being a fantasista? For him, probably, that word had to be filled with a different meaning than the one attributed to Rivera. He wasn't the genius who waits for the ball to invent, standing still, awaiting inspiration. He was the genius who moves, who sacrifices himself, who defends and counter-attacks, who never spares himself. As the technical reports of the time describe him, those written by people who saw him play live: fast, elegant, technically impeccable, endowed with great willpower and a continuous sacrifice for the team, always involved in the defensive phase.

Today, Sandro Mazzola is a gentleman in his eighties, with white hair and a still-vivid gaze, who works as a commentator for RAI and talks about football with the same passion, the same enthusiasm as when he played it. He says that defenders, to stop him, had to study, to prepare, because he never repeated himself, he was always different, always unpredictable. And when they ask him about today's young players, about new champions like Barella or Lautaro, he smiles with a melancholic air and recounts anecdotes of a football that no longer exists. The one where you played for the shirt, for the people in the stands, for the history you carried inside. The one where football was first and foremost passion.

Perhaps, his most beautiful thought on football, the one that sums it all up, is contained in a joke he made years ago, talking about modern champions with the lightness of one who has nothing left to prove: "I'd put myself in the middle with them on the wings. As a trident, it wouldn't be bad." He was joking, sure. But deep down, in that joke, he spoke the deepest truth. Because Sandro Mazzola, in any era, on any team, in any shirt, would always find a place on the pitch. Because true talent, the one that comes from heart and head together, has no time. It doesn't age. It isn't forgotten.

{7} Giancarlo Antognoni

The Architect of Elegance: In Search of Giancarlo Antognoni

Talking about Giancarlo Antognoni means talking about football as if it were a waking dream. He was one of the purest interpreters of that romantic role we call the fantasista—that player whose main weapon is imagination. For Fiorentina and for Italy, he wasn't simply a footballer: he was its creative pulse, the poet on the pitch whose canvas was the green grass. His game was an enchanting alchemy of superb technique and vision, but what made him truly unique was an extraordinary tactical intelligence. Antognoni didn't just exist within a system: he interpreted it, shaped it, and ultimately elevated it to something superior.

"Number 8 and a Half": A New, Different, Unforgettable Playmaker

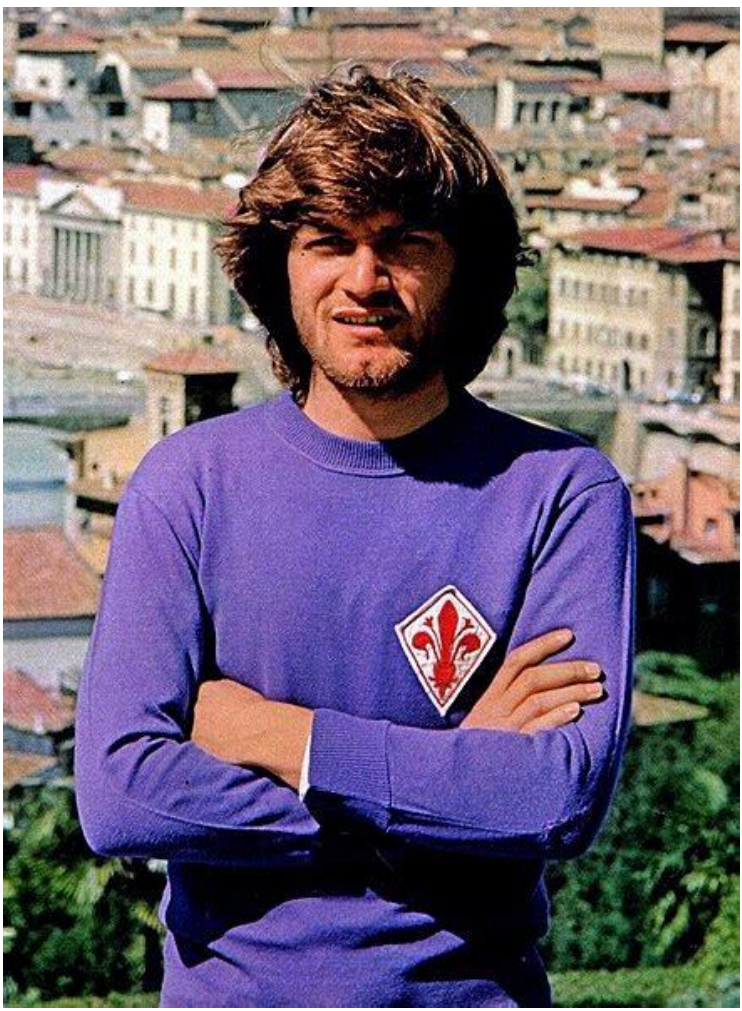
Antognoni himself gave us a wonderful portrait of his style, defining himself as an "8 and a half." This simple phrase captures the magic of his double soul. He wasn't that classic, somewhat static fantasista who seemed to float waiting for the ball. No. He united the generosity and substance of a central midfielder (number 8) with the fantasy and incisiveness of an attacking midfielder (number 10). This was his essence.

His contribution was a continuous cycle between duty and poetry. He knew that the freedom to invent had to be earned, gained on the pitch. First, he did his part, the less beautiful one: he'd track back to mark an opponent, close down a space, help the team win the ball back. Only after, when the ball was there, at his feet, would the magic begin. He'd receive and invent, as he liked to say. So, starting from the dirty work, he built the platform for his art. He was a complete midfielder, one of

those who knew how to dictate the tempo, who could carry the ball out of defense, who could stitch play together with a single pass and who, when needed, would arrive on time in the box for a powerful and precise shot from distance. A number 10 with the lungs and generosity of a midfielder.

A Timeless Tactical Intelligence: Adapting for the Love of the Team

His football intelligence was so refined that it made him incredibly adaptable, always at the service of the team. Throughout his career, he demonstrated the ability to



read matches and modify his game based on what was needed. He could drop his range of action and become a playmaker in front of the defense, dictating the tempo with precision. He could play further forward, between the lines, tormenting defenders as a pure attacking

midfielder. And, as he himself recalled with Enzo Bearzot in the National team, he could even play as a mezzala, covering kilometers and kilometers, without ever giving up that creative spark and the search for a shot on goal. It wasn't a betrayal of his talent, but proof of total love for the team, of a champion who put the group's balance above everything.

A Glance at Today's Football: Nostalgia for a Lost Art

Over the years, Antognoni has become an attentive and melancholic observer of the changing game. He looks at modern football with a mixture of admiration and regret, especially when he thinks of players like himself. He is convinced that modern tactics, made of rigid patterns and slotted-in players, have extinguished the light of the classic number 10. The fault, according to him, lies with the flood of 4-4-2 and 4-3-3 that have invaded the pitches.

And his reasoning is simple and true: in certain systems, so armored and organized, there is no longer space for those who live by fantasy and movement. That handkerchief of field between the lines, the kingdom of the fantasisti, has been occupied, squeezed in a vice. He regrets that today's coaches primarily look for "concrete, physical" players, perfectly slotted into the chessboard. And this, he says, comes at the expense of "creativity and spectacle." His is not a "no" to tactics, it's an appeal not to forget that the strongest players, the true ones, are not within the patterns: they are the ones who make the patterns. It's an invitation not to build teams of toy soldiers anymore, but to leave space for those few, rare artists capable of inventing something that no one had foreseen.

{8} Diego Armando Maradona

The Touch of the Gods: Maradona's Innate Gift

When we utter the name Diego Armando Maradona, even the highest expressions like "natural talent" sound improper, like clothes too tight for the one who must wear them. He didn't belong to the category of those who learned their craft well. He belonged to another dimension: that of those born with a seal imprinted on their soul, something so precious and mysterious that it escapes any attempt at earthly explanation. His movements didn't taste of study and repetition: they seemed etched into his genetic code, natural as the flow of blood or the rhythm of breath.

Those fortunate enough to see him live, in the stadiums, tell of experiencing a hypnotic sensation. It wasn't just what he did that mattered, but the way he did it. There was an astonishing nonchalance in every action, a fluidity that transformed the impossible into the ordinary. While others struggled with the ball as if with an enemy, he caressed it, treated it as a natural extension of his own body. He seemed to have made a secret pact with that leather sphere: "You obey me, and I will give you eternity."

The Center of Gravity and the Challenge to Nature

The first thing that captured the gaze, observing Maradona, was his physical architecture. Stocky, solid, with his center of gravity so close to the ground as to seem glued to the grass. This conformation, a pure gift of nature, gave him an extraordinary balance. While defenders, tall and awkward, struggled with changes of direction, he spun on himself like a top, with a speed that seemed to mock the laws of physics. They

could pull him, push him, charge him: he stayed on his feet, the ball glued to his boot, while his opponent kissed the ground. It wasn't just physical strength: it was an innate ability to absorb contact and turn the opponent's force back against them.

The Gaze That Sees Beyond: A Radar in His Eyes

Then there's the chapter on vision. All memorable playmakers possess it, but Maradona's belonged to a superior league. He didn't just see his teammates: he sensed where they would be a moment later. He didn't stare at the ball: he explored space, scrutinized movements, calculated trajectories. He seemed endowed with an internal radar that revealed what was happening behind him, without even needing to turn. His assists are legendary precisely for this: they weren't simple passes, but gashes that tore defenses apart, launching the teammate one-on-one with the goalkeeper with watchmaker precision. It was as if he watched the game in three dimensions, while others settled for faded black and white.

The Dribble: An Intimate Dialogue with the Sphere

Maradona's dribbling wasn't just a technical matter: it took on the contours of an artistic manifestation. It didn't require nutmegs or flashy feints. His dribbling was sparse, lightning-fast, deadly. A deceptive sway of the hips, a sharp burst, and the opponent was left out of the scene. But the most admirable aspect was his control of the ball at speed. While racing at high speed, the ball remained welded to his foot as if held by an invisible thread. He could beat two, three, four opponents without slowing down, without losing command. It was his distinctive trait, something no training session could ever instill. He simply did it. Like breathing.

And then there was his way of shielding the ball with his body. He used his compact build to position himself between the ball and the opponent, spreading his arms to build a trench. The defender would circle around him, try to stretch a leg, but the sphere was always there, guarded, unreachable. He seemed like a tortoise in its shell, impregnable.

The Left Foot and Power: The Foot That Drew Destinies

His left foot would require a treatise unto itself. It possessed not just precision: it unleashed power, was born from instinct, defied all prediction. Maradona could shoot in every way: with the full instep for a thunderous finish, with the inside for a lob that seemed a caress, with the outside for a curving cross that sliced through the air like a boomerang. There was no prefabricated gesture: there was an innate adaptability to the circumstance. The ball would arrive, and his foot already knew the answer, without waiting for reason's permission.

Instinct and Unpredictability: The Advantage of Genius

But perhaps the most innate gift of all lay in his unpredictability. Maradona himself didn't know what he would do a moment later. He lived in the present, reacting to the stimulus of the moment. This is perhaps the most difficult quality to describe: the ability to always stay one step ahead, not because he had analyzed the opponent, but because his instinct galloped faster than any reasoning. While the defender reasoned: "Now he'll go right," he had already taken the left path. While the goalkeeper prepared for the shot, he would pass to a teammate. It was disciplined chaos, improvisation raised to a system.

An Imaginary Dialogue: The Secret Revealed

Naples, Soccavo training ground, the Eighties. A young local journalist

has wangled permission to watch a training session. After the exertion, he approaches Maradona as he sprawls on the grass to take off his boots.

Journalist: "Diego, forgive the intrusion. Can I ask you something?"

Maradona: (wiping sweat with his shirt) "Certainly, but if you're looking for an official interview, you need to talk to the press office..."

Journalist: "No, no. It's a personal question. As a fan. I watch you play and I wonder: but you, when you do certain things... do you think about them? I mean, when you beat three opponents and then place the ball on the far post... do you plan it beforehand, or does it just happen?"

Maradona studies him, sketches a smile, and lies back, propping himself up on his hands.

Maradona: "Listen, I'll tell you something. When I play, I don't think. Never. If I start thinking, I get it wrong. It's like... like when you walk. Do you stop to think about how to place one foot in front of the other? No. You just do it. And that's how it works for me. The ball arrives, and I know what to do. I can't explain how. I just know."

Journalist: "So it's... a divine gift?"

Maradona: (bursting out laughing) "My mother swears it is. She says that at three years old, in Argentina, I grabbed a rag ball and never let it go. She swears even then I did things other kids couldn't even imagine. Maybe it's true. Maybe I was born this way. But let me tell you another truth."

Journalist: "What?"

Maradona: (his expression turning serious) "The gift isn't enough. If you don't suffer, if you don't work hard, if you don't want to win more than anything else in the world, the gift abandons you. On the pitch, I pour out everything. Everything I have. Because I know that this gift, if you don't honor it, is taken away from you."

Maradona gets up, gathers his boots, and heads towards the dressing room. Then he stops, turns, and adds:

Maradona: "You know what the real secret is? When I play, I'm happy. Like a child. And when you're happy, things happen by themselves. You don't have to think about them. You feel them inside. And that's it."

And with a smile, he disappears into the tunnel. The journalist remains

there, sitting in silence, contemplating the deserted pitch, wondering if it's truly possible to capture in words something that is made of pure, simple, boundless wonder.

The Absolute Genius: Why Maradona Was More Than a Footballer

There is one adjective that returns every time we speak of Diego Armando Maradona, and that adjective is "impossible." Impossible what he could do with a ball. Impossible the naturalness with which he humiliated three opponents in a space the size of a handkerchief. Impossible the precision with which he placed the ball where only he saw a teammate's movement. At Napoli, Maradona didn't just play football: he rewrote it, reinvented it, transformed it into something that resembled a mystical vision more than a sport.

Those who saw him live, at the San Paolo stadium, all tell the same thing: you couldn't understand how he did it. He seemed to have a second's advantage over the rest of the world, as if time for him

passed more slowly. When he received the ball, even with his back to goal, even surrounded by two or three opponents, the stadium held its breath. Because you knew: from there, anything could happen. A dry dribble that left the opponent frozen like a cone. A first-time pass that split the defense in two. A sudden shot that curled into the top corner. He wasn't predictable. He wasn't human. He was Diego.

His strength lay not only in his technique, but in his ability to carry the team on his shoulders and drag them beyond their limits. That Napoli wasn't made of champions: it was made of honest players, football workers, who ran for him and with him. But when Diego got the ball in midfield and started running towards goal, something magical happened. Opponents would retreat, watch him, almost hypnotized. And he, in that movement, would find the space to pass to a teammate or to slot the ball past the goalkeeper with a left foot that seemed guided by destiny.

He wasn't just a footballer. He was a leader, a symbol, a living myth. And the city of Naples, with its popular and passionate soul, immediately recognized him as one of their own. Because Diego didn't play for himself: he played for everyone. Every goal was a liberation, every move a collective embrace.

An Imaginary Dialogue: Bianchi and Maradona Before the Final

Naples, May 10, 1987. The scudetto is one step away. Napoli must beat Fiorentina at the San Paolo to enter history. In the dressing room, half an hour before kick-off, coach Ottavio Bianchi looks for Maradona. He finds him in a corner, sitting, with headphones on, eyes closed, toes tapping on the concrete floor. Bianchi sits down next to him, without speaking, waiting for Diego to open his eyes. After a minute, Maradona takes off his headphones and looks at him.

Bianchi: (with a calm, almost fatherly smile) "How are you, Diego?"

Maradona: (with shining eyes) "Good, Mister. I'm good. Today I feel light."

Bianchi: (nods, looking at the empty pitch beyond the dressing room door) "I know. I saw it in your eyes yesterday in training. You had that light. The one you have when you're about to do something special."

Maradona: (smiles, a shy, almost childlike smile) "Mister, today I don't know what I'll do. But I know I want to win. For these fans. For this city. They deserve everything."

Bianchi: (places a hand on Diego's shoulder) "Listen to me. I can draw patterns, I can talk tactics, I can tell you how to move. But on the pitch, Diego, there's you. And you are more than any pattern. I ask you only one thing."

Maradona: (curious) "What, Mister?"

Bianchi: "When you get the ball, look at them. Look them in the eyes. Fiorentina's defenders. They are afraid. I know it. I feel it. And you, when you see the fear in their eyes, do what you know how to do. Don't think about it. Don't reason. Let yourself go. Because when you play on instinct, Diego, there's no defense in the world that can hold you."

Maradona lowers his gaze for a moment, then raises it again. His eyes are two embers.

Maradona: (with a firm, decisive voice) "Mister, today I won't let them play. I promise you. I'll take the ball and run. And they'll chase me, but they'll never catch me. Because today I run for Naples. For all those who have suffered. For all those who have been waiting for this moment their whole lives."

Bianchi: (stands up, shaking his hand firmly) "I know, Diego. I know. Now come. Let's go make history."

Maradona stands up, pulls on the light blue shirt, and heads towards the tunnel. Before leaving, he turns for a moment towards Bianchi.

Maradona: (with a knowing smile) "Mister, we'll toast together tonight."

Bianchi nods, as Diego disappears into the tunnel, towards the roar of the stadium. A few hours later, Napoli beats Fiorentina 4-0, Maradona scores a brace, and the whole city explodes with joy. History had been written.

Looking at a comparison between two Argentine players, Diego Maradona and Omar Sívori, is like observing two faces of the same extraordinary, rebellious Argentine coin. Both were small left-footed geniuses who conquered Italian football and became deities in Naples. However, their paths, personalities, and ultimate legacies were profoundly different. Sívori was the ardent precursor, the "Maradona of the 60s," while Maradona became the apocalyptic talent who realized the fantasy that Sívori could only begin.

Omar Sívori: The Argentine Precursor

Omar Sívori was the first Argentine superhero to overwhelm Italian football. His career was marked by enormous success, a rebellious spirit, and a legacy that created a path for Maradona.

Sívori's career shone especially during his legendary period at Juventus, between 1957 and 1965, where together with John Charles and Giampiero Boniperti he formed the "Trio Magico." His ability and charisma led him to win three Serie A titles, three Coppa Italias, and to receive the prestigious title of European Footballer of the Year in 1961. His adventure at Napoli, from 1965 to 1969, made him a beloved figure, even though, unfortunately, he failed to win significant trophies.

Sívori was a "daring and brilliant" attacker, appreciated for his creativity and technical talent. His signature move, the famous "nutmeg," consisted of passing the ball through the opponent's legs. Behind his style of play was a visible joy, like a child playing in the park. He scored 167 goals in 253 matches for Juventus, reaching the peak of his career with a surprising record of six goals in a single match against Inter. His personality was that of the archetypal "rebel," characterized by a world-class ego. He expressed his opinions bluntly and did not hesitate to clash with authorities, from club directors to national team coaches. He was known for his aversion to training, intensifying his reputation as a fiery and charismatic competitor.

Diego Maradona: The Apocalyptic Successor

Diego Maradona did not just play for Napoli; he became the very soul of the club. His period at Napoli, from 1984 to 1991, was a concentration of overwhelming magic that forever changed the history of the team. His legend was forged through historic successes: he led Napoli to its first Serie A titles in 1987 and 1990, in addition to winning the Coppa Italia in 1987 and the UEFA Cup in 1989, challenging the hegemony of northern Italy. Although he also played for Barcelona, his bond with Naples is indissoluble and inseparable.

Maradona was a complete and unstoppable offensive force, capable of combining breathtaking dribbling, vision, precise passing, and a goal-scoring instinct. He was the quintessential playmaker, an athlete capable of winning a match on his own, as demonstrated in some of

the most memorable performances, including that of the 1986 World Cup final. His short stature and muscular power made him practically impossible to mark, even in the brutally defensive era of 80s Serie A.

Maradona's personality was as complex as his talent. He was seen as a folk hero for the less fortunate, embodying the fervor and fighting spirit of the Neapolitan people. However, behind his triumphs lay serious imperfections, with his struggle against addiction and questionable associations leading to a dramatic fall. His relationship with success and fame was one of self-destruction, and this aroused both admiration and sadness.

The Intriguing Link: How Sívori Shaped Maradona's Destiny

The stories of Sívori and Maradona are not merely parallel; they are deeply intertwined. Omar Sívori played a crucial and direct role in Diego Maradona's career, acting as a bridge between two eras.

In 1978, an eighteen-year-old Maradona was attracting the attention of the biggest European clubs. During that period, Sívori, working as a scout for Juventus in South America, informed the club's president, Gianni Agnelli, about this "phenomenon" emerging in Argentina. Agnelli sent Giampiero Boniperti to Argentina, accompanied by Sívori himself, to see him up close.

Boniperti's verdict, after witnessing an unforgettable performance by Maradona and observing his lifestyle, changed the history of football forever: "As a footballer he is phenomenal, but he is not suitable for Juventus because of his behavior." Sívori famously replied, "But you're buying him to be a footballer, not to be a waiter!" This rejection opened the doors to Napoli.

Years later, after a difficult period at Barcelona, it was Sívori who convinced Maradona to move to Napoli. Together with José Alberti, Sívori flew to Barcelona and persuaded a hesitant Maradona: "If you want to become the greatest footballer in the world, you must come to Naples." His vision that winning with a club like Napoli would lead to immortality proved to be surprisingly prophetic.

In this way, the paths of Omar Sívori and Diego Maradona crossed, weaving a nostalgic tale of greatness, talent, and the magical bond they shared with the city of Naples and the heart of the Argentine people. Both represent not only football, but the very soul of a nation that has always seen football as a form of expression and redemption, a language without words that resonates in the hearts of many, a legacy that endures in time and collective memory.

{9} The 80`s

The 80s are a magical decade, with the arrival of the greatest champions in the world and the affirmation of pure Italian talents.

- Michel Platini (Juventus): The French genius, elegant and relentless. Three consecutive Ballons d'Or, an ability to make runs and read the game that was out of the ordinary. A pure number 10.

- Zico (Udinese): The "White Pelé." He arrived in Udine for a handful of billions and made an entire region fall in love. A master of football, free kicks, and infinite class.

- Socrates (Fiorentina): The "Doctor," philosopher and footballer. A midfielder with superb technique and a unique personality, who enchanted Florence for a season.

- Giuseppe Giannini (Roma): "Il Principe." Raised in Roma, he became its symbol and playmaker, inheriting the tradition of the Giallorossi number 10.

- Liam Brady (Juventus): Irish, very elegant, velvety left foot. A midfield playmaker who enchanted Turin for a few seasons.

- Karl-Heinz Rummenigge (Inter): German, but with a technique and speed that made him a complete striker. An absolute champion.

- Preben Elkjær (Verona): "A Wild Horse" as they called him. Unpredictable, powerful, trascinatore of the scudetto-winning Verona. An atypical but authentic fantasista.

The 90s are the golden decade of Serie A, the most beautiful league in the world. A forge of Italian talents and a massive import of foreign champions.

- Rui Costa (Fiorentina/Milan): The Portuguese "Maestro." Elegance, millimeter-perfect passes, leadership. One of the best interpreters of the role in those years.

- Zinedine Zidane (Juventus): The French champion, who arrived at Juventus and became the greatest. Class, power, vision: all in one player.

- Dejan Savićević (Milan): The Montenegrin "Genius." Unpredictable, capable of absurd plays and unforgettable goals (like that one in the Champions League final). A true artist.

- Paul Gascoigne (Lazio): "Gazza." A brilliant clown, immense talent, a career marked by injuries and indiscipline. But in Rome, they remember him fondly.

- Youri Djorkaeff (Inter): French, technical, goalscorer. An attacking midfielder capable of spectacular plays; he formed an unforgettable partnership with Ronaldo at Inter.

- Enzo Francescoli (Cagliari): The "Uruguayan Hurricane," arriving at Cagliari at the end of his career, but with the class of a true champion.

{10} Gianfranco Zola

Gianfranco Zola, the Last Dreamer: A Nostalgic Journey into the Heart of the Fantasista

Talking about Gianfranco Zola as a "fantasista" doesn't simply mean

describing a footballer. It means opening an old album of yellowed photographs, the kind with crumpled corners, and letting yourself be transported back in time, to an era when football could still excite with a simple touch of the ball. It means telling the story of a dreamer, an artist, the perfect embodiment of that all-Italian archetype that today, perhaps, we have forgotten. The term "fantasista" is precisely that: a dreamer. One of those who on the pitch don't calculate, but imagine; who don't just execute, but create. Players capable of igniting the imagination with a dribble, a flash, a stroke of genius that tactics and logic can never explain. Zola's career is a precious embroidery spanning three decades, a golden thread linking the myth of Maradona to the magic of English football.

The Legacy of a God: The Pupil of the Pibe de Oro

Zola's destiny intertwined with that of the greatest of all very early on. He wasn't yet the "Magic Box," he was just a Sardinian kid with a slight build when he arrived in Naples, in the last glimmers of the golden era. And there, under the sun and the weight of the light blue shirt, something extraordinary happened: he became the pupil of Diego Armando Maradona. It was 1989, and Zola found himself sharing a dressing room with a God. It wasn't a simple inheritance, but a sentimental education in football. Observing the Pibe de Oro every day in training at the San Paolo, young Gianfranco learned the secrets of the trade: the very soft ball control, the peripheral vision that anticipates opponents' moves, the fantasy, and above all, that damned and wonderful art of the free kick that would become his trademark.

When the God left, the weight of that silence fell entirely on Zola's minute shoulders. Naples adopted him, made him its own. A banner appeared in the San Paolo curva, simple and powerful: "Gianfranco, count on you!" ("conZolaci tu!" – a pun on his name). He, who had inherited the sacred number 10 shirt, was no longer just a player. He was the guardian of a flame, the keeper of a dream that must not be extinguished.

The Pure Fantasista: The Art of Dribbling and the Magic Box

Zola was the quintessence of the fantasista. He had that low center of gravity that made him seem glued to the ball, and with it he could enchant. His dribbling was tight, quick, unpredictable, leaving defenders like statues of salt, motionless, watching the dust he kicked up. It wasn't just functional skill, it was pure fantasy. It was the trademark of the classic number 10, the one that made you jump out of your seat.

And in Italy, that fantasy had the bitter taste of nostalgia. A fan, in an old blog, described him thus, with words that taste of melancholy: "The Sardinian fantasista, with the necessary comparisons, managed to evoke the 'Pibe de Oro' in many of his plays, endowed as he was with tight dribbling and a deadly free kick." Yes, because in him we saw a bit of that Diego who had made us dream.

But it was in London, far from Italy, that his art found the perfect stage and earned him the most beautiful nickname: "Magic Box." A name that says it all: a player from whom, as from a box full of surprises, anything could emerge, at any moment. An improbable assist, an impossible goal, a backheel that seemed like a joke. Chelsea fans adored him precisely for that, for his plays of pure fantasy. In England, where football was more physical and direct, he seemed like a fish out of water, yet he became a fish in the sea. For many, he is still the greatest player in the club's history. England gave him what Italy, perhaps too caught up in tactical minutiae, had never fully granted him: the freedom to simply be himself, an artist.

The Fantasista in a Changing National Team: Between Baggio and Sacchi

But Zola's story in the Azzurri is perhaps the most poignant part of his memory album. It's a story of immense joys and deep sorrows, of crystalline talent clashing with an era of transition.

His debut for the national team came late, at 25, in 1991 under Arrigo Sacchi. But the path to the pitch was blocked by another absolute champion, another number 10 with a velvety touch: Roberto Baggio. The Divine Ponytail was the starter, the enchanter. For Zola, this meant patience. He spent evenings on the bench watching him, learning, waiting his turn.

Then came the American World Cup in '94. Zola was on the plane, full of hope. He started on the bench, watching Italy struggle. Then, in the

round of 16 against Nigeria, with Italy down a goal and the dream fading, Sacchi turned to him. He came onto the pitch with the task of turning on the light. Instead, after just twelve minutes, came the blow. A straight red card for a non-existent foul, a cruel decision that sent him to the dressing room. Zola's world crumbled in an instant. From the stands, head in his hands, he watched Baggio become a hero, score, and drag Italy to the final. He, meanwhile, was out, a spectator of his own shattered dream.

After the nightmare, Zola finally became a mainstay. The qualifiers for Euro '96 were his moment: seven goals in eight matches, a hat-trick against Lithuania that made everyone dream. It seemed like his tournament. In England, he wore the number 10 and started. In the decisive match against Germany, at Wembley, Italy had to win. A penalty kick arrived. A chance to write history. The weight of Italian hopes fell on Zola. He placed the ball on the spot, but his shot was saved. Under the pouring rain of London, another dream was broken.

But what defines a man is how he reacts. Eight months later, on a cold February evening in 1997, Zola was back at Wembley for a World Cup play-off against England. And this time, he wrote history differently. With a predator's flash, he pounced on a loose ball and slotted it past the goalkeeper. It was the only goal of the match, a legendary 1-0 victory on English soil. As he celebrated, you could feel the sense that years of frustration were melting away in that perfect moment.

That was one of his last great joys in the Azzurri. For the '98 World Cup, the new coach Cesare Maldini preferred the young Del Piero and recalled the veteran Baggio. Zola, the man who had waited with such patience, who had suffered so much, was excluded. He retired with 10 goals in 35 appearances. The numbers are poor for telling his story in the national team. They don't speak of the pain, the hope, the sublime touch. His adventure in the Azzurri was a fascinating and frustrating symphony, a mix of pure magic and deep pain. A legacy made not only of trophies, but of moments of pure, unattainable joy. A fantasista, indeed. A dreamer.

{11} Roberto Baggio

The Divine Ponytail: The Poetry of an Immortal Myth

After celebrating the divine Diego, it is right that our gaze falls upon another divinity of Italian football: Roberto Baggio, the Divine Ponytail. If Maradona was the sun around which the entire Neapolitan universe revolved, Baggio was something different, perhaps even more poignant: he was a shooting star too beautiful for this world, forced to chase its own orbit through the sometimes hostile skies of top-level football. His career was not just a succession of matches and goals: it was a novel, a work of passion and misunderstanding, the tale of an artist's soul in struggle with the rigidity of doctrinaires.

Because Baggio was not simply a footballer: he was the purest incarnation of that eternal conflict that inhabits Italian football, the one between the anarchic beauty of genius and the iron discipline of the system. A conflict he lived out on his own skin, like a secular martyr, offering the world a spectacle of grace and melancholy that still moves us today.

The "9 and a Half": A Corner of Paradise in the Middle of the Pitch

To understand Roby Baggio's soul, one must accept the impossibility of pigeonholing him. He himself, with his shy air and that rebellious tuft, seemed to apologize for being so different. Michel Platini, who knew about number 10s, defined him as "9 and a half." He wasn't a pure striker, those who live by instinct and poaching. He wasn't a classic playmaker, those who dictate the tempo from midfield. He lived in that no man's land which is every fan's dream: the space between the lines, that handkerchief of grass where things happen that you can't explain, but that you remember for a lifetime.

And there, in that cramped and crowded space, Baggio did things that didn't seem of this world. Imagine a painter working on a canvas the size of a postage stamp, yet painting entire cathedrals inside it. He would receive the ball with his back to goal, with two opponents on him, and in an instant he already knew everything: where his teammates were, where they would move, from where the danger would come. His gaze did not look at the present: it looked at the future.

The Touch That Seemed a Caress

Baggio's ball control was something supernatural. The ball wouldn't bounce far away, wouldn't die under his foot: it would fall asleep, as if tired after a long journey, ready to start again at the slightest signal. In a space the size of a handkerchief, he could shield the ball with his body, wait for the right moment, and then release a teammate with a pass that seemed drawn by hand. He had that very rare gift of slowing down the game when everyone else was running, and accelerating it when everyone else was stopping.

His dribbles weren't made of flashy feints or humiliating nutmegs. They were essential, almost shy movements, but lethal as the bite of a viper. A feigned movement of the torso, a sharp acceleration, and the opponent would stay there, still as a lamppost, wondering where that kid with the ponytail had gone. And he would fly away, light, as if the grass of the field were silk and the air supported him.

The Left Foot That shined with Poetry

And then there was his left foot. That wasn't a foot, it was a musical instrument. He could caress the ball for a lob that sails over the goalkeeper with the delicacy of a butterfly. He could strike it with full instep for a thunderbolt that curls into the top corner. He could trace curving trajectories that seemed to study the curvature of the world. His free kicks were works of art: balls that sail over the wall and then drop down, implacable, to kiss the net, as if they had a date with destiny. And he was lethal with both feet, an anomaly of nature, capable of taking a penalty with the same millimeter precision with his right and left. Even today, no one in Italy has scored more penalties than him, with a frightening 86% success rate.

But it wasn't just technique. It was soul. It was that slender, almost fragile figure of his, bending under the blows of defenders, yet always getting up, eyes fixed on goal. It was that melancholy that inhabited his gaze, that sense of precariousness that made him so human and so divine at the same time.

The Misunderstood: A Ferrari Driven by a Traffic Cop

And precisely this diversity, this purity, became his condemnation. Because Italian football, that of Sacchi and Lippi, of systems and tactics, didn't know what to do with such a cumbersome artist. He wasn't a cog: he was the clockmaker. And this, for the worshippers of the perfect machine, was an insult.

Sacchi and the Cage of the 4-4-2

The fiercest conflict was with Arrigo Sacchi, the prophet of zonal marking and high pressing. Sacchi had built a perfect Milan, a war machine where every player was a cog. And in his 4-4-2, in that armored system, there was no room for a juggler. The space between the lines, Baggio's kingdom, was to be erased, not inhabited. When Baggio arrived at Milan as a Ballon d'Or winner, Sacchi looked at him like a mechanic looks at a thoroughbred horse: beautiful, but useless for his engine. He forced him to play as a second striker, a role Roby hated, to run back, to press, to sacrifice himself. It was a failed

marriage before it even began. And Baggio, with his meek air but with a rage inside he couldn't contain, gave the world the perfect phrase, the one that sums up an entire career: "At this moment, I feel like a Ferrari driven by a traffic cop."

There you have it. A Ferrari forced to crawl at thirty kilometers an hour in traffic, to respect speed limits, never to rev the engine. An image that makes you smile, but grips your heart. Because that Ferrari had an engine inside that could win any derby, if only they had let it run.

The Rise of Del Piero and the Sunset in Turin

In Turin, at Juventus, Baggio had known glory: a scudetto, a Ballon d'Or, the love of a people. But there too, the wind changed. A blond kid arrived, dynamic, with a good boy's face and feet firmly on the ground. His name was Alessandro Del Piero. He was strong, very strong, and perhaps more suited to the dictates of the new course. Marcello Lippi, the coach, chose him. Baggio, the purest genius, was set aside, considered a luxury the team couldn't afford. It was a cruel choice, but rational. Italian football had decided: better a player functional to the system than an artist who challenged it.

And the funny thing is, a few years later, at that very Juventus, another great coach, Carlo Ancelotti, fell madly in love with Zinedine Zidane. And he was so seduced by his class, his elegance, his unpredictability, that he built the whole team around him. Ancelotti, who as a young coach had sold Gianfranco Zola and rejected Baggio, converted to the cult of the number 10. But for Baggio, it was too late. Once again, his destiny was to arrive at the wrong moment.

The Refuge: Mazzone, Brescia, and the Liberation of the Soul

After being discarded by the greats, after wandering like a lost soul, Baggio finally found a home. And the home was not a big stadium, not a scudetto-winning team. It was Brescia, a provincial city, and a coach with a heart as big as a piazza: Carlo Mazzone, 'Sor Magara.'

Mazzone wasn't a refined tactician, he didn't draw complicated patterns. He looked at Baggio and understood. He understood that this kid didn't need chains, but wings. He didn't need tasks, but trust. So, with his folk wisdom, he told him: "You go on the pitch and do what you know. For the others, I'll take care of it." And for the first time, perhaps, Baggio felt free. Free to invent, to make mistakes, to try again. In that welcoming refuge, far from the spotlight, the Divine Ponytail became happy again.

It was at Brescia that another small piece of magic happened. In training, Baggio played with a skinny, shy kid, with two eyes that already seemed to see the future. His name was Andrea Pirlo, and he played there, behind the strikers, in Baggio's role. Mazzone looked at that scene and had a brilliant intuition: he moved Pirlo a few meters back, in front of the defense, and entrusted him with the keys to the game. Baggio, up front, continued to be Baggio. Pirlo, deeper, began to become that playmaker who would change the history of football. Two fantasisti, two generations, one idea: beauty multiplies, it doesn't divide.

The Legacy: A Dancer on the Edge of Risk

The story of Roberto Baggio is the story of a man who spent his life fighting against the world for the right to be himself. It's the story of a boy who kicked melancholy away, who transformed fragility into strength, who challenged dogmas and doctrinaires with the sole weapon of his poetry.

At the 1994 World Cup, in that damned final, with the Pasadena sky seemingly collapsing on him, Baggio shot his penalty over the moon. And in that ball flying towards the sky, there is all the meaning of his career: the tension upwards, the risk of the gamble, the possibility of failure. But also the beauty of having tried, of having danced on the razor's edge his whole life, giving to those who watched him emotions that no tactic, no system, no victory could ever equal.

Because Baggio was not just a footballer. He was a feeling. He was that kid who made you stand up in front of the television, who made you hold your breath, who made you believe that, perhaps, a more beautiful world was possible. And even if the traffic cops tried to stop him, his Ferrari continued to run, fast and light, straight into the hearts of those who do not forget.

{12} Francesco Totti

Let us set aside, for a moment, the cold language of tactics and schemes. To truly understand Francesco Totti, you have to enter the world that shaped him and the world that he, in turn, painted with his feet. A world that, in today's football, seems increasingly like a distant and wonderful dream.

Let's retrace these points with hearts full of nostalgia, delving into the soul of Il Gladiatore.

The World of Francesco Totti: A Journey into Memories

Imagine a Rome that was not just a city, but a feeling. The sun-baked cobblestones of Trastevere, the echo of a Vespa reverberating in a narrow alley, the scent of pine nuts spreading from Villa Borghese through the air. This was the world Francesco Totti was born into, and a world that never let him go. In an age when footballers have become global brands, without a homeland, Totti remained a local monument—as permanent and beloved as the Colosseum itself. His story is not just about football; it's the last great novel of an era that is no more.

The Evolution of the Maestro: The Story of Three Lives on the Pitch

His career was not a single, static work of art; it was a triptych, three distinct portraits of the same genius, each painted with the light of its own era.

1. The Boy with the Wind in His Hair (The Winger of His Early Days): Think back to a young Totti at the end of the 90s, with that long hair and lean physique, playing under the crazy professor Zdeněk Zeman. He was placed on the left wing, a right-footed kid in a world of left-footers. There was a romantic rebellion in all of this. He would receive the ball with his back to the touchline, with the Tiber glistening down there, beyond the curves of the Stadio Olimpico, and the whole world seemed to slow down. He would cut inside, not with the brute force of a sprinter, but with the cunning of a boy raised playing in the streets. That wasn't just a position; it was his apprenticeship in vision. From that privileged angle, he could see everything—the runs, the empty spaces, the geometry of the field unfolding before him like a map. It was there that he learned that football was a puzzle to solve, not just a battle to win.

2. The Prince of Rome (The Attacking Midfielder of the Golden Years): Then came the years of Fabio Capello, and Totti was moved to the role of attacking midfielder, his spiritual home. This was Totti at his peak, the undisputed King of the City. He operated in "the hole," that sacred patch of grass between the midfield and the opposing defense, a place where only the most trusted artists are allowed to dwell. He wasn't just playing football; he was conducting an orchestra. A glance, a feigned shoulder movement, and then—a pass that seemed to defy the laws of physics. He would play the ball first-time, blindly, into an area of the field that only Vincenzo Montella knew he had to attack. The crowd wouldn't even see the assist; they'd only see the goal, and then they'd turn to each other with wide eyes, wondering: "Did you see

how that happened?"

This was the era of the 2000-01 Scudetto. Do you remember that night? The city of Rome didn't just celebrate a trophy; it wept. Thousands upon thousands of Romanisti flooded the streets, and at the head of

them all, wrapped in a huge flag, was their prince. He had given them something money can't buy: the confirmation of their dreams. He had turned their eternal hope into tangible joy. At that moment, he wasn't just a footballer; he was every boy who had ever kicked a ball in a Roman alley, living out his own dream.

3. The Philosopher King (The False Nine): As the years passed, his legs grew heavier, but his mind became even sharper. When Luciano Spalletti asked him to play as a "false nine," it wasn't a demotion; it was an apotheosis. He was no longer the prince charging into battle, but a philosopher king, observing his kingdom from a new, higher throne.

Try to imagine: he would start as a striker, but as soon as the match began, he would drop back, almost nonchalantly, into midfield. The center-back tasked with marking him would be in a state of total confusion. "Do I follow him? If I do, my whole defensive line is thrown off. If I don't, he has the whole field to himself."

And Totti, with the wisdom of a Roman emperor, exploited the situation every single time. He would receive the ball in open spaces, turn, and with the indolent elegance of a man sipping an espresso at a

café table, unfurl a 40-meter pass precisely onto the running winger's foot. And he scored, too. In 2006-07, at 30 years old, he won the European Golden Shoe, redefining the very concept of a striker. He demonstrated that you didn't need to be faster than the game; you just needed to be more intelligent.

The Soul of the Fantasista: The Last of a Dying Breed

But tactics were just the skeleton. Totti's soul was the fantasista. He was the last of a dying breed—a player for whom football was an act of spontaneous creation, not robotic execution.

In an age of "pressing triggers" and "expected goals," Totti operated on instinct and inspiration. He was the kid at the playground trying the cucchiaio (chip) not because it was the safest option, but because it was the most beautiful. Who can forget that cucchiaio against Inter? Or that "no-look" pass that left defenders lunging at air while the ball was already in the back of the net? He played with a wonderful, reckless abandon, as if the consequences of a mistake didn't matter in the face of the glory of the attempt.

It's why the city forgave him his occasional frustrations. They knew he carried all their dreams onto the pitch with him. When he won, they won. When he failed, they felt his pain. It was a symbiotic bond, a shared emotional existence.

And, most importantly of all, he stayed. In an era of mercenaries, he was the faithful son. He refused the riches of Real Madrid and the glamour of Milan, not out of fear, but out of a deep, unwavering love. He understood something modern football has forgotten: that there are things more important than trophies. Belonging is more important. Identity is more important. Love is more important.

When, on that sunny day in May 2017, he left the pitch for the last time, he didn't simply retire a number. He left a void. The Stadio Olimpico didn't just lose a player; it lost a piece of its soul. The world of Francesco Totti—a world of loyalty, audacious creativity, and profound love—closed its gates that day, leaving us with the task of telling his stories, with the hushed and reverent voice of nostalgia.

{12} Alessandro Del Piero

After wandering the sun-drenched streets of Rome following Francesco Totti's footsteps, it's almost a duty to turn our gaze northwards, let ourselves be enveloped by the Po fog, and arrive in Turin, where the other star of the Italian football firmament shone. Telling the story of Alessandro Del Piero means opening a different fairy tale book—a fantasista chiseled with the measured and elegant traits of an artist who knew how to hold rationality and fantasy by the hand, and make them dance together.

As we did with Totti, let's abandon for a moment the tactical diagrams and whiteboards, and dive headlong into the enchanted world of "Pinturicchio."

The World of Alessandro Del Piero: A Journey into Memory

If Totti was the limestone of Rome, dark and ancient, scorching under the midday sun, Del Piero was the crisp air descending from the mountains of his beloved Marca Trevigiana, that scent of wet earth and wood that fills your lungs with purity. He arrived at Juventus without the swagger of a street kid, but with that quiet, deep gaze of a child that someone, with an inspired pen, had defined as "son of ice with the eyes of an old man." In a football that shouted, he whispered. In an era of excess and posing, Del Piero was a distant star—a "kite tethered to the ground with lead chains," held back by a discipline and reserve that formed a casket for his genius. His story is the last, moving portrait of elegance, in a football that was already forgetting the meaning of that word.

The Child of San Vendemiano: Where It All Began

To understand Del Piero, you have to close your eyes and let yourself be carried back in time, to San Vendemiano, a tiny dot lost among the hills of the Treviso area. There, Alessandro was not yet "Pinturicchio," not yet the darling of an entire stadium. He was simply a child with almond-shaped eyes and a ball sewn to his feet. A child so in love with the game that, just to be on the pitch, he would even agree to go in goal when the older kids forced him. And he would go willingly, because that strange vantage point, standing there between the posts, gave him the luxury of watching the match unfolding in front of him, of studying the movements, of learning the script before reciting it. That almost divine view from the goalkeeper remained sewn onto him forever. He learned that football is not just chasing a ball, but above all waiting, observing, predicting. He grew up like that, in the silence of the province, a child who already seemed to possess the wisdom of an old sea wolf.

Mark Iuliano, Alessio Tacchinardi, Igor Tudor, Filippo Inzaghi, Angelo Peruzzi (capitano), Zinédine Zidane; : Alessandro Birindelli, Alessandro Del Piero, Didier Deschamps, Gianluca Pessotto, Edgar Davids.

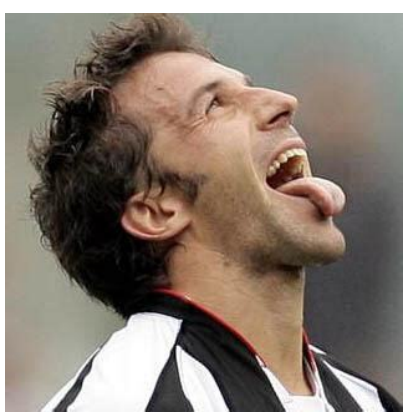
The Legacy of the Number Ten: A Weight Too Great?

Then comes the great leap, the arrival at Juventus. And with the Bianconeri shirt, that number arrives, the 10. A shirt that smelled of legend, worn by demigods like Michel Platini and, before him, by Roberto Baggio, the last divo sacrificed precisely to make room for the new chosen one. The weight of that legacy could have crushed any youngster. But Del Piero was not just any youngster. He wore that shirt with the grace of a monk, with almost religious respect, but also with the silent awareness of one who knows he can write, one day, his own chapter. He didn't try to be a copy of Baggio, he didn't try to imitate Platini. He simply, and stubbornly, tried to be himself: Alessandro Del Piero.

The Artist and His Three Lives: The Evolution of a Genius

His career, like a novel in three volumes, was not a single, static work of art. It was a triptych, three portraits of the same man, each illuminated by the special light of its own era.

- The Sorcerer's Apprentice (The Years of Carefreeness): Think back to a young Del Piero in the mid-90s, with those long curls and the lively gaze of someone stepping into life. Under the wise guidance of Marcello Lippi, he played as a second striker, often drifting left, into that patch of the field that would become his kingdom. He was granted the freedom to roam, to seek those invisible spaces that only his eye could spot. There was a romantic rebellion in that play, but it was a gentle rebellion. He didn't shout his greatness to the world; he showed it with discretion, like a painter removing the veil from a freshly finished fresco.



And what wonders he painted! The hat-trick against Parma on his first start, that left-footed volley in Florence that seemed to caress the ball and deposited it into the net, announcing to the world that a star

was born. In those years, he learned that football is not just flair and fantasy, but above all movement, intelligence, the art of being in the exact place at the perfect moment to receive the ball and transform everything into poetry. Watching him play was an almost childlike pleasure, because you could see the pure joy of a boy having fun, and that fun was transmitted like a contagion to those lucky enough to watch him.

- Pinturicchio, Prince of Turin (The Years of Glory): As the seasons passed and the goals multiplied, Del Piero became the undisputed King of Turin. That was his home, the role for which he had been shaped. He was no longer just a second striker; he was the nerve center of one of the strongest teams in Europe. He played with an almost mathematical lucidity, his movements essential, perfect, lethal.

He didn't just play football: he composed verses on the green grass. A feigned shoulder movement, a sudden burst, and then—a curling shot towards the far post that seemed to defy the very laws of physics. It was the "Del Piero Zone," that rectangle of grass on the left side of the penalty area from which he could bend the ball into the top corner with a precision that had something otherworldly about it. Goalkeepers knew it, they knew what was about to happen, but they were powerless. It was like trying to stop a storm with your hands.

Who can forget that magical night in Amsterdam against Ajax, when with a goal and a sumptuous performance he dragged Juventus to the top of Europe? Or the three consecutive Champions League finals, an achievement that tells of the greatness of that Signora? He won six Scudetti, but more than the trophies, what remained imprinted was the way he played. He was the personification of the Bianconeri motto: "Fino alla fine" (Until the end). He was elegant, precise, and totally, absolutely reliable.

- The Captain, The Faithful (The Years of Darkness and Redemption): But the true greatness of a man is not measured under the sun of victory, but in the deepest darkness. And when the Calciopoli hurricane struck in 2006, stripping Juventus of two titles and throwing them into Serie B for the first time in their history, the world stopped to see who would have the courage to stay.

The stars, one by one, abandoned the ship. The mercenaries fled. But Del Piero, along with a handful of heroes like Buffon, Nedvěd, and Camoranesi, remained. He could have chosen any club in the world. Instead, he chose to lead his Juventus through the desert.

Try to imagine the scene: one of the greatest footballers on the

planet, World Champion just a few weeks earlier, humbly lining up in the second division. Not a word too many, not a lament. He simply put on the Bianconeri shirt and got to work. He scored 20 goals that season, becoming top scorer in Serie B and bringing Juventus immediately back to Paradise. That wasn't a relegation. It was the apotheosis of loyalty. He was no longer just a prince; he was the captain, the noble father, the man who showed the whole world that there are things greater than glory. In that year of darkness, he was the only light.

And then, when Juventus breathed the air of the Champions League again, came the night that sealed his legend. At the Santiago Bernabéu, the temple of world football, a 33-year-old Del Piero delivered one of the greatest individual performances ever remembered. Two goals, the second a free-kick of rare beauty, silenced the Madrid cauldron. As he left the pitch, a few minutes from the end, the entire Bernabéu rose to its feet. The fans of Real Madrid, the team he had just humiliated, applauded him. It was a tribute of absolute respect, moving. Del Piero himself recounted: "I was very focused, but at one point I asked myself: 'But did these people just stand up to applaud me?' A special, incredible moment... like winning a trophy." He demonstrated that you don't need to wear the shirt of the biggest club to be the biggest star; you just need to be yourself, with unwavering dignity.

The Soul of the Fantasista: The Last Romantic

But the tactical schemes, the positions on the pitch, were just the frame. Del Piero's soul was that of the fantasista—but declined in an exquisitely Italian form. He was the "rational fantasista," a player for

whom creativity was not chaos, but a controlled and highly intelligent explosion of pure genius.

In a football increasingly dominated by athleticism and power, Del Piero moved with the precision of a surgeon and the gaze of a poet. He was that child who played in goal to be able to watch the match longer. That strange childhood gave him a unique, unrepeatable perspective. He saw designs where others saw only confusion. He created spaces where others saw only opponents.

He was a specialist of the highest level in set pieces, 53 goals from free kicks in his career testifying to that. His technique was perfect—the "sottopalla" (hitting under the ball), that clean cut on the leather, the impossible trajectory that resulted. Who can forget that free kick against Germany in the semi-final of the 2006 World Cup? A goal that made an entire nation explode with joy and forever carved his name into the legend of Italian football. In that ball was contained everything: technique, coolness, the weight of an entire history.

He played with a "reckless" quality, if you will, but it was a measured, calculated recklessness. He attempted the improbable because he had already calculated every variable and knew, with absolute certainty, he could succeed. His passes weren't just precise: they were thoughts translated into movement. His runs weren't just fast: they were perfectly synchronized with the tempo of the game. As an insightful journalist wrote, Del Piero represented the "ideal and logical continuation of Roberto Baggio"—the torch passed from one genius to another.

And then, there was that rarest gift of making everything seem so simple, so natural. As if that ball curling into the top corner were the most obvious consequence in the world. As if that free kick bending time and space were a normal warm-up exercise. It was an elegance that left you breathless, precisely because it seemed effortless. And perhaps, for him, it wasn't effort. It was simply his way of being in the world, on and off the pitch.

When the Curtain Falls

When, on that afternoon in May 2012, after winning his last Scudetto, he left the pitch for the final time in a Juventus shirt, there were not only tears. There was the awareness, clear and painful, of having witnessed for almost twenty years something unrepeatable. He hadn't simply stopped playing. He had closed an era.

The Juventus Stadium didn't just lose a footballer; it lost a piece of its own soul. The world of Alessandro Del Piero—a universe made of elegance, intelligence, crystalline creativity, and timeless loyalty—closed its gates that day. And we, who were fortunate enough to cross his gaze on the pitch, are left only to tell and retell his deeds, with the hushed and grateful voice of those who guard a precious treasure.

Because Del Piero was not just a footballer. He was an idea of football. An idea of elegance. An idea of loyalty. In a world that was running too fast, he remained the fixed point, the beacon in the fog, the last romantic of a most noble lineage. And for this, we will never stop remembering him.

{14} Paolo Di Canio

Let your wandering in the heart of the Italian fantasista now take you in a different direction, darker and more incandescent. We have walked with Totti among the cobblestones of Trastevere, we have sighed with Del Piero in the Turin fog, we will wander with Cassano through the alleys of Bari. Now let's prepare to be shaken, to be provoked, to be dazzled. Because we arrive at Paolo Di Canio.

If Totti was the ruling prince, Di Canio was the rebel gladiator. If Del Piero was the court poet, Di Canio was the wild minstrel singing songs of defiance. If Cassano was the wounded child, Di Canio was the angry teenager who never stopped fighting the world. Talking about him means talking about a fantasista forged not in sports centers, but in the living fire of the Roman suburbs, a player whose talent took your breath away and whose temperament was a volcano constantly erupting. He was a "crazy genius," one of those who make you jump out of your armchair, who make you shout at the television, who make you fall in love and despair in the same instant.

The World of Paolo Di Canio: The Rebel Fairy Tale of a Gladiator

The Roots of the Gladiator: Quarticciolo, the Forge of Character

To understand Paolo Di Canio, we must leave the upscale neighborhoods of Rome and venture into the most authentic periphery,

into the Quarticciolo district, on the edge of the city. If Totti was the boy raised under the benevolent sun of Trastevere, Di Canio was the product of a harsher, tougher land, where life gives you nothing and everything must be conquered with your teeth. Quarticciolo was a working-class suburb, made of public housing and narrow courtyards, where the only way to earn respect was to show yourself stronger than you were.

And Paolo, as a child, was not strong. He was a chubby kid, with crooked legs, knees that touched, forced to wear orthopedic shoes. The other kids looked at him, someone made fun of him. But inside that imperfect body, inside those already proud eyes, there was a determination that few could understand. His answer to the world was not to hide, to shrink, to apologize for what he was. It was exactly the opposite. He began to exercise obsessively, to run, to chase that ball which was his only reason for living. He wanted to sculpt his body, he wanted to transform himself into someone that no one could ever make fun of again. He wanted to become a gladiator.

And the ball, for him, was never just a game. It was a declaration of intent. It was a magnificent, resounding "fuck you" to all those who had doubted him. Every dribble, every goal, every shout of exultation to the sky was a message: "Look at me now. I am here. And I'm never leaving."

The Apprenticeship: Among Sacred and Great Masters

His career began in the suburban fields, then the leap to Lazio, the team of his heart, the one he had supported as a child. But at first, in Rome, there was little space. Di Canio was too rebellious, too instinctive for the rigid patterns of Italian football at the time. Thus began a pilgrimage that led him to wander around Italy: Juventus, Napoli, Milan, Roma. Everywhere he left his mark, everywhere he made people talk about him, but everywhere he seemed a guest, never the master of the house.

At Juventus, he learned the trade alongside true champions, but his character already emerged, already created sparks. In Naples, the most passionate city in Italy, he found a kindred spirit, a public that adored him for his hunger, for his competitive rage, for his way of throwing his heart over the obstacle. But it was still too early. He had to wait, to grow, to find his dimension. And that dimension, in the end, he would find far from Italy, in a foreign land that would understand him as no one had been able to.

The Master's Art: Technique as an Act of Rebellion

Di Canio's style was pure improvisation, a wild dance that followed no pre-set choreography. He played as a striker, as an attacking midfielder, as a winger, but his true position was only one: wherever the ball was and there was a defender to humiliate. His game was based on a low center of gravity, on a velvety dribble that seemed to glue the ball to his foot, and on an unnatural ability to shield the ball while his mind gave birth to the impossible.

Watching him play was like seeing a street boxer who, somehow, had ended up in an art gallery and decided to paint his masterpieces directly on the walls, without permission, without regard for rules. His technique wasn't the polished product of a youth sector; it was raw, instinctive, and absolutely devastating. There was nothing academic about him. There was only pure, wonderful, anarchic creativity. When he received the ball, the stadium held its breath, because everyone knew anything could happen. An intoxicating dribble, a humiliating nutmeg, an impossible curler. Or nothing. But it was always worth the wait.

The Control That Defied Physics

And then there is a moment, just one, that contains in itself all his essence, all his greatness, all his madness. Those lucky enough to

see it live, who have rewatched it thousands of times on television, will never forget it. March 2000, West Ham against Wimbledon. A long ball drops into the area, seems harmless, an easy ball for the goalkeeper or a defender. But Di Canio, with his back to goal, doesn't just control it. He calls it down from the sky. In a fluid, impossible, lethal movement, he traps the ball with his right foot, lifts it slightly, and then, without letting it drop, without a moment's hesitation, without a blemish, unleashes a bicycle kick that flies into the net with the power of a thunderbolt, with the precision of a surgeon.

It's a moment of genius so perfect, so athletic, so sublime that even today, decades later, it remains the benchmark for every wonderful goal in the English league. It was voted goal of the decade. But it wasn't just a goal. It was a declaration. It was Di Canio saying to the whole world: "I am here. And I can do things with a ball that you can't even dream of." In that gesture, in that overhead kick, there was all of him: power, technique, theatricality, the desire to amaze, to be unique, to leave his mark.

The Soul of the Fantasista: A Living Contradiction

But Paolo Di Canio's soul was a paradox, a beautiful and terrifying contradiction, an enigma that no one ever fully resolved. He was a man capable of producing moments of such divine inspiration, and together acts of such crazy self-destruction, that he left everyone speechless.

He was the man who, in 1998, after being sent off, had pushed referee Paul Alcock to the ground with one hand, almost nonchalantly. A gesture of such petulant, theatrical, absurd fury that it cost him eleven match bans and transformed him into a cartoon villain, a caricature, an example of what a footballer should never do. He was the man who argued with Martin Keown, who bickered with coaches, from Capello to Trapattoni, who seemed to carry a storm cloud with him wherever he went, ready to erupt at the slightest breath of wind.

Yet, this was also the same man who, in December 2000, performed one of the most noble, pure, moving acts in the history of football. With the goal wide open and the ball at his feet, with the chance of a lifetime within tap-in range, he saw the Everton goalkeeper, Paul Gerrard, lying injured on the ground. In a split second, in a decision that defines a man's character much more than a thousand words, Di Canio ignored every striker's instinct, every call of glory, every desire to score, bent down and picked up the ball with his hands, stopping play. For that act of pure sportsmanship, for that gesture that went against every logic of

modern football, FIFA awarded him the Fair Play award. The same hands that had pushed a referee, that had argued with half the world, now caressed a ball to protect a fallen opponent. This was the Di Canio enigma: the angel and the devil, the saint and the sinner, coexisting under the same skin, often without warning.

The Attitude of the Rebel: A Life Philosophy on the Pitch

As a football man, Di Canio was the incarnation of passion without filters. He was a "hothead," one who played on instinct, from the gut, from pure feeling. He couldn't stand playmakers, couldn't stand pre-set patterns, couldn't stand anyone telling him what to do. He wanted the stage for himself, and he wanted it in the most authentic way possible: sweating it, shouting it, conquering it with the force of his character.

His career in Italy, in the early years, was tormented precisely because of this. Italian football of the late 90s, dominated by the ideas of Arrigo Sacchi and his epigones, was a football of suffocating pressing, pre-set movements, tactical sacrifice, men as cogs in a perfect machine. For an anarchic artist like Di Canio, that was a Procrustean bed, a gilded cage where his talent couldn't breathe. He needed space, freedom. And so, like many misunderstood geniuses before him, he was forced to emigrate to find his dimension.

England became his promised land. In that football so physical, so fast, so passionate, so little inclined to tactical sophistication, his impulsive and brilliant style was not only tolerated, it was adored, celebrated, elevated to a model. English fans saw in him a modern gladiator, one who fought for every ball as if it were his last, who never spared himself, who lived every match as if it were a battle, and every battle as if it were the last.

His game was an explosive mix: a volcanic work rate and an extroverted genius. He chased lost balls, dropped deep to receive, and then set off again like an express train, leaving behind a trail of incredulous, humiliated, annihilated defenders. He was a living counter-attacker, a force of nature capable of turning a match around in a single, incandescent moment of pure, brilliant madness.

The Psychology of the Rebel: The Roots of an Eternal Dissatisfaction

But to fully understand Di Canio, to comprehend the profound reasons for his constant agitation, his perpetual clashing with the world, you have to delve into his psychology, into that dark and fascinating territory that hides behind the mask of the gladiator. Behind the muscles and the shouts, behind the poses and provocations, there

was a deep restlessness, a chronic dissatisfaction, a shadow that never left him.

That child with crooked legs and orthopedic shoes, that kid teased by his peers, had never truly healed. He had built a wall of muscles and character around himself, an impregnable fortress made of pride and determination. But inside, deep down, the wound of those early humiliations, of that gaze from others judging him imperfect, was still open, still bleeding. His obsessive need for affirmation, his constant search for challenges, his pathological inability to accept a secondary role, were all defense mechanisms, all ways to keep that insecure child living inside him at bay.

He had to constantly prove, to everyone, that he was the best. He had to shout louder than others to be sure he was heard, seen, loved. This is why he argued with everyone, why he was never satisfied, why even in moments of glory, when everything seemed to be going right, he always seemed to be looking for a new battle to fight, a new enemy to defeat, a new provocation to launch. His inner peace was a mirage, a shadow he chased without ever being able to reach it, a chimera that moved away every time he thought he had grasped it.

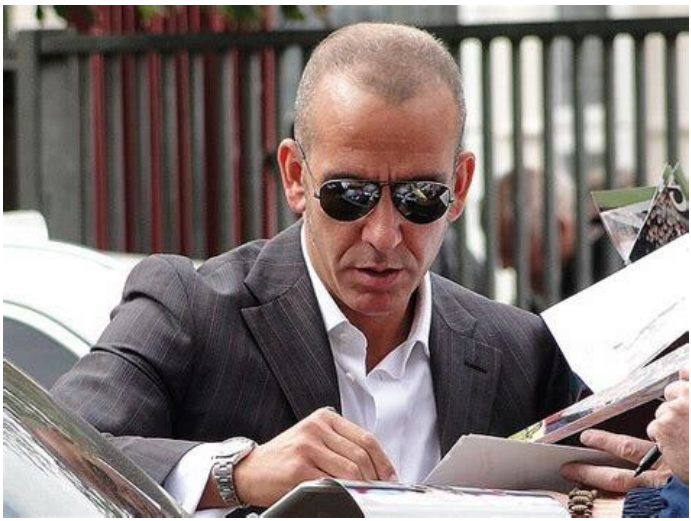
The Flame That Burned Too Brightly

And then there was politics. His Roman salute, that gesture he carried like a shadow, like a brand, which marked his career and obscured his legend. For his admirers, for those who shared his ideas, it was a gesture of belonging, of identity, of consistency with an ideology. For his detractors, for the vast majority of the world, it was an infamous mark, a recall to dark pages of history that should never be forgotten. Whatever the judgment, and everyone is free to make their own, that gesture was part of him, of his complex, contradictory, provocative personality. It was another way to stand out, not to be like others, to remain true to himself and his ideas, for better or worse. But it was also his condemnation, his insurmountable limit, the reason he could never be loved by everyone, why the national team was forever precluded to him, why he turned into an inevitably divisive character, loved and hated with the same, identical, uncontrollable intensity.

The Tragedy of the Rebel: The National Team Never Conquered

And so we arrive at the greatest injustice, the greatest regret, the greatest wound of his career. Paolo Di Canio never played a minute for

the Italian national team. Not one appearance, not one minute, not one call-up



A scandalous, unjustifiable, unforgivable absence for a player of his talent, for a man who had enchanted in England, who had won in Italy, who had demonstrated on every pitch that he was one of the strongest, most creative, most decisive players of his generation.

But it was also an inevitable consequence, perhaps, of his character. The national team coaches, from Sacchi to Trapattoni, from Maldini to Zoff, knew that calling up Di Canio meant also calling up his volcano. It meant bringing into the Azzurri dressing room not just a champion, but also an unmanageable man, a loose cannon, one who at any moment could explode, against an opponent, against a referee, against a teammate.

{15} Antonio Cassano

Let me take you by the hand into a story that tastes of regret. A story of dazzling light and deep shadows, of absolute genius and self-destruction. After walking with Totti under the Roman sun and sighing with Del Piero in the Turin fog, our journey into the heart of the Italian fantasista now takes us to a darker, more tormented place. We go down, along the boot, to Bari Vecchia, among the narrow alleys that smell of sea and misery, to search for the fragments of a shattered dream. We go to look for Antonio Cassano, the last wild child of Italian football.

Because if Totti was the crown prince and Del Piero the poet laureate, Cassano was the scugnizzo (street urchin), the street kid who had

learned the art of the ball not on the perfect fields of sports centers, but on the uneven pavement of working-class neighborhoods, with an imaginary goal painted on the wall and a ball that was both a toy and a lifeline.

The World of Antonio Cassano: Elegy of an Unfinished Genius

The Child of Bari Vecchia: Where It All Began

To understand the regret, we have to close our eyes and go back in time. To Bari, in that labyrinth of narrow alleys and laundry hanging in the sun they call Bari Vecchia. There, Antonio was not yet "Fantantonio," not the cover character. He was just a child with eyes too big and hunger in his heart. A child raised without a father, with only the desperate love of a mother who did backflips to make sure he lacked nothing. The ball, for that child, was not a simple game. It was a safe refuge. It was the only friend who would never betray him, the only certainty in a world that offered him very few. It was his only escape from a life that, without that ball, would have reserved only misery and oblivion for him.

At seven years old, he showed up alone for trials at Pro Inter. The coach, Giovanni Lasala, recounted that at first they didn't even want to let him in, he was too small, seemed like an ant lost among giants.

Then the tests began. And when they saw that kid with the clever eyes juggling the ball as if it were glued to his foot, as if it were a natural extension of his body, then they understood. They understood that in front of them was no ordinary child. There was something special, something that the Italian province produces only once a generation, and perhaps not even that.

He grew up like that, among the crumbling walls and the distant sound of the sea, a kid who had within him a talent so immense as to seem almost unfair, almost cruel. A talent that one day, a cold December day in 1999, revealed itself to the whole world with the power of an unexploded bomb.

It was December 18th. Bari-Inter. A seventeen-year-old kid, in his second Serie A match, receives a forty-meter pass. Then something happens that those who were at the San Nicola stadium will never forget. With a fairy-tale backheel control, he settles the ball and begins to dance. He beats Christian Panucci, one who had won everything. Then he beats Laurent Blanc, world champion, European champion, one who had lifted the World Cup. He feints past the goalkeeper, and deposits it into the net with the calm of someone taking a Sunday stroll. The stadium exploded. All of Italy, in front of the television, was left breathless. Who was that kid? What was his name? Antonio Cassano. And he had just written his declaration of intent to the world: "I am here, look at me, you will never forget me." They immediately called him "El Pibe de Bari." A comparison with Maradona, the greatest of all. And no one, at that moment, dared to smile or turn up their nose. It seemed like destiny.

The Gold of Rome: Under the Wing of the Stern Father

In 2001, Roma, newly crowned Italian champions, spent sixty billion lire on him. A sum that made your head spin just hearing it. Cassano arrived in the capital as a young prince, and found two figures who would indelibly mark

his life. Francesco Totti, the captain, the idol of an entire city, who took him by the hand, brought him to his home, treated him like a younger brother to protect. And Fabio Capello, the stern coach, the general, who looked at that kid and saw in him the son he never had, the creature to shape with a firm and loving hand.

In Rome, Cassano played football that was pure poetry. He wore the number 18, but danced like the most elegant of number 10s. Dribbles that intoxicated like wine too strong, nutmegs that humiliated without mercy, backheel plays that seemed like insults to gravity. With Totti, they formed a wonderful pair, two geniuses who communicated without words, only with glances, with an understanding that seemed the result of who knows how many years of acquaintance. He twice won the award for best young player in Serie A. It seemed like the dawn of an infinite reign. It seemed that nothing could stop him.

But inside that boy, inside that agile body, there was a volcano always bubbling. Capello was the stern father, the one who demanded discipline, order, respect. Cassano was the opposite: he was pure anarchy, he was wind that does not want to be channeled into any embankment. They argued, clashed, said terrible things to each other, and then made up, as happens in complicated families, in those families where love is mixed with rancor. Capello, to define those absurd behaviors, those impulsive acts that had no rational

explanation, invented a word: "cassanata." It immediately entered the Italian football vocabulary. Yet, beneath the tough exterior, beneath the mustache and stern gaze, the coach loved him. Because he knew that when Antonio turned on the engine, when that whimsical genius decided to take the field, he could win matches on his own. He could make you forget any argument, any misdeed, any night spent eating Nutella.

Madrid, the Fall: When the Dream Becomes a Nightmare

Then, in 2006, what had to happen happened. Cassano argued with Roma over his contract, and transferred to Real Madrid. The dream of every child who has ever kicked a ball. He, the boy from Bari Vecchia, nobody's son, in the temple of world football, at the Bernabéu, playing with Zidane, with Ronaldo, with Beckham. It seemed like the perfect fairy tale, the happy ending to a story that began among the narrow alleys and the scent of the sea.

And instead, it was the beginning of the end. Because in Madrid, suddenly, Cassano found himself alone. Completely alone. Without a guide, without a father, without anyone to protect him from himself, from his worst enemy. And without brakes, his deepest instinct, the self-destructive one, took over. He began to eat like a damned soul. Nutella by the spoonful, kilos of pasta, mountains of sweets. His body, once lean and sculpted like an athlete's, transformed, bloated, betrayed his own image. The Spanish newspapers, as cruel as they can be when they want to strike, nicknamed him "El Gordito," the chubby one. Real Madrid, one of the most powerful clubs in the world, went so far as to fine him for every extra gram, as you do with children who can't control themselves.

He himself, years later, with that disarming sincerity that made him unique and at the same time so vulnerable, confessed: "I was 23 years old, I was at Real Madrid. I liked football, sex, and eating. It was perfect. If I'd had another job, no one would have looked at me. I'm not handsome, but I can play football." And in that phrase, said with the nonchalance of someone who doesn't realize the tragedy they are living, is all his drama: the awareness of being special only with the ball, and the atavistic fear of not being enough without it.

And then, as if in a mockery of fate, as in one of those Greek tragedies where the gods amuse themselves by tormenting mortals, Capello arrived. Him, his mentor, his adoptive father. For a moment, it seemed everything could go back to how it was. Instead, Cassano argued with

him over a substitution, insulted him, and was frozen out of the squad. His Madrid dream turned into a nightmare: nineteen matches, two goals, and the atrocious awareness of having thrown away the chance of a lifetime, of having wasted the golden ticket to paradise.

The Soul of the Fantasista: The Last Flicker of Poetry

But tactics, when talking about Cassano, become an irrelevant detail, almost an annoying background noise. Because he was the fantasista in its purest state, the last heir to an ancient lineage that saw the number 10 not as a footballer, but as an artist, a rebel, a misunderstood genius destined to suffer more than others.

His style was made of pure flair, of jazz-like improvisation. He could invent a goal from nothing, like that one against Inter that we still carry in our hearts like a sweet wound. He could provide an assist that even the teammate couldn't imagine, because he saw passing lanes that were invisible to others, as if he were playing on a parallel dimension. He had goal sense, vision, crystalline technique. He was unpredictable, exactly like his character, exactly like his life.

When he played for himself, for the pure pleasure of it, when he managed to forget the world around him and its infinite demands, he was irresistible. We saw it at Sampdoria, when he returned to Italy and, for a moment, for the blink of an eye, rediscovered the joy of living. In Genoa, with Pazzini, he formed one of the most beautiful striking partnerships in Serie A, and Sampdoria flew into the Champions League, dreaming with open eyes of a future that finally seemed possible. We saw it at Euro 2012, when, despite everything, despite the years and excesses, he dragged Italy to the final with plays of a true champion, as if time had never passed. In those moments, for an instant, we all deluded ourselves. We thought the real Cassano had finally emerged, that the boy had become a man, that the storm had finally calmed.

But it was just an illusion. A beautiful, poignant mirage. Because the fantasista in him coexisted with a child who never grew up, a Peter Pan who refused to accept the rules of the adult world, who preferred to fly away rather than face reality. And the child, in the end, won. As always.

Why the Sky Fell on Him: The Psychological Reasons for a Shipwreck

The question we have all asked ourselves, over the years, like an

obsessive refrain, is only one: why? Why did such a pure, immense talent, so capable of enchanting the world, not become the greatest of all? Why did Cassano remain only a splendid meteor, and not become a fixed star in the firmament of football?

The answer is complex, painful, and speaks to us of something that goes far beyond football. It speaks to us of the human soul, its fragilities, its wounds.

The Primary Wound: The Absence of the Father and the Endless Search

The first reason, the root of everything, is psychological, and lies in Antonio's childhood. His father abandoned him before he could even know him, leaving a void that no sporting triumph could ever fill. Psychology teaches us that the absence of a father figure creates a deep wound in children, an inexhaustible need for recognition, protection, confirmation. The child grows up with the question: "Why wasn't I enough for him? What must I do to be loved?".

Cassano, as an adult, spent his life desperately searching for a father. He looked for him in Capello, the stern man who imposed rules and discipline, and when he felt betrayed by him, he denied him with the blind fury of a disappointed son. He looked for him in presidents, in coaches, in anyone who offered him a word of affection or authority, and when he felt not loved enough, he insulted them, provoked them, pushed them away, as only an angry child can do. He was a child asking for attention, shouting "look at me, love me, tell me I'm worth something," and he did it in the worst way, the most self-destructive: arguing, provoking, destroying himself just to get a glance, a reaction, a confirmation of his existence.

Rebellion as a Defense Mechanism

Then there was his character, of almost unbearable complexity. His continuous rebellion, his allergy to rules, were a defense mechanism. If no one had protected him as a child, he would protect himself, refusing any authority, any imposition. Anyone who tried to impose discipline automatically became an enemy, a threat to his fragile autonomy. He argued with everyone: with Capello, with Spalletti, with Delneri, with Mazzarri, with Stramaccioni. With presidents: Sensi, Garrone, Berlusconi. With teammates: even with Totti, the older brother who had welcomed him into his home, who had given him everything, who had

loved him like a brother. The reason? Childish jealousies, misunderstandings, his pathological inability to accept a secondary role, to take a step back, to share the spotlight. Because for a wounded child, any attention taken away is a wound that reopens.

At Sampdoria, in 2010, when he seemed to have finally found peace, when it seemed that life had granted him a truce, he argued with president Garrone, the man who had welcomed him like a son, who had restored his dignity, and got himself kicked out. He himself, years later, with tears in his eyes and a broken voice, said: "That argument was the biggest regret of my personal life. I will never forgive myself." In that phrase, in that admission of guilt so raw and sincere, is all his drama: the atrocious awareness that he had been, he alone, the executioner of himself, that he had destroyed with his own hands the only place where he had been truly happy.

The Search for Pleasure as an Anesthetic

And then there was his life off the field, that vortex of excess that always accompanied him like a shadow. Food, sex, immediate pleasures: they were the anesthetic he used to calm the pain, to fill that bottomless void. Cassano was never an exemplary professional, and he was the first to always admit it with disarming sincerity: "I always only did fifty percent of what I could do, I always found a way not to train professionally." Food was his great love and his great enemy, a substitute mother who filled him when he felt empty. In Madrid, he gained fourteen kilos in a few months, as if he wanted to build a wall of fat to protect himself from the world. In Rome, it's said that Capello had him weighed every day, as you do with boxers, with children who can't control themselves. His body, subjected to continuous weight fluctuations, to continuous betrayals, suffered. Muscles, tendons, breath: everything paid the price for his greed, his hunger for love.

And then women. In his autobiography, with that hyperbolic figure that distinguishes him, he wrote of having had six or seven hundred by the age of twenty-five. A number that, whether true or exaggerated, tells of a boy who lived fame as a playground without rules, as an endless merry-go-round of immediate pleasures, without thinking about tomorrow, because tomorrow, for a child who lived in uncertainty, is just a threat.

The Signal from the Sky: The Stroke and the Second Chance

On October 30, 2011, at Milan, fate knocked on his door in the most dramatic way possible. Cassano suffered a stroke while in retreat with

the team. He was hospitalized urgently, operated on his heart. It seemed over. It seemed that his story should end like this, in the cruelest way, like a divine punishment for all the excesses. Instead, against all medical predictions, against all logic, after six months he returned to play. And he even scored, on his debut. It was a sporting miracle, a very powerful signal, a message from destiny saying: "Antonio, I'm giving you another chance, don't waste it. This is your second life."

But for Cassano, not even that was enough to change him completely. The wound was too deep, the need for self-destruction too rooted. He continued to argue, to move from team to team, like a dry leaf carried by the wind, until the definitive farewell in 2017, after seventeen days and zero appearances for Verona. A mocking, almost grotesque ending, for a career that had begun under the banner of the purest, most touching wonder.

The Legacy of a Universal Regret

In the end, when the curtain falls on this story that tastes of ancient tragedy, the balance is painful, and leaves us with a lump in our throats. Fabio Cannavaro, his teammate in the national team, a man of the world and of football, once said: "If Antonio had had his head on straight, he would have won five Ballons d'Or." Perhaps it's an exaggeration dictated by affection and nostalgia. Perhaps not. Certainly, the potential to become a legend, to sit at the table of the greatest of all time, alongside the true immortals, was all there.

Cassano ended with thirty-nine appearances and ten goals for the national team, a meager haul for talent of his kind. He won scudetti with Roma and Milan, a Spanish championship with Real, but never as an absolute protagonist, never as that predestined one we glimpsed at seventeen, on that cold December night in Bari. He won seventeen "Premi Guglielmo," the famous "Tapiri" that Italian television awards with mocking irony to the most unfortunate or controversial characters of the week. A perfect paradox for him: the genius who won prizes for his misfortunes, his falls, his excesses.

Today, Antonio Cassano is a television pundit. One who speaks without mincing words, who criticizes everyone without sparing himself, who says what he thinks with the same brutal sincerity as ever, with the same inability to filter. He has become, perhaps, the perfect commentator. Because he truly understands football, more than many others put together. And of mistakes not to repeat, he has made so many that he could write an encyclopedia in several volumes, a

secular bible for all the young talents who risk losing themselves.

And so, when we hear him speak on television, with that unmistakable Apulian accent and that sincerity that sometimes makes you uncomfortable, that sometimes hurts, we can't help but smile. But it's a melancholy smile, veiled with sadness, with regret. Because in every word, in every criticism, in every verbal excess, in every outburst, we see again that kid from Bari Vecchia, with eyes too big and the ball glued to his foot, dancing

among defenders as if it were the only thing in the world he knew how to do. We see what he could have been and was not. He who could have become the greatest of all, and instead remained a broken promise, an unfinished work.

And we ask ourselves, once again, with our hearts gripped in a vice that does not loosen: what would have happened if that child had found, besides the ball, a little inner peace? What would have happened if someone had managed to heal that ancient wound, to fill that immense void he carried inside? What would have happened if Antonio Cassano had learned to love himself at least as much as he loved that ball, at least as much as we loved watching him play?

Because Cassano was not just a footballer. He was a warning. A silent and powerful admonition. The painful, piercing demonstration that talent, alone, is not enough. That without discipline, without a head on your shoulders, without a little love for yourself, even the most precious, brightest, purest diamond can turn into a fistful of dust, into

nothing. And in this, perhaps, in his story which is both wonder and warning, joy and regret, lies his greatest, and most painful, lesson for us all.

Every time a child gets a ball at his feet, every time we see a young talent light up a suburban pitch, we dream that he might become the new Cassano. The real one, the pure one, the one capable of enchanting as only he could. And every time, in our hearts, we hope he also has the strength not to become like him. Not to get lost in the labyrinth of his own demons. Not to shatter against the rocks of his own character. Because the world needs geniuses, artists, fantasisti. But it also needs those geniuses to remain whole, not to shatter along the way. And we, who have loved Antonio Cassano with all our hearts, who rejoiced at his plays and suffered for his falls, will forever wonder, in the nights of melancholy: what if...?

{16} Andrea Pirlo

"Pirlo, the last fantasista?" – how many times have I encountered this question, suspended in the air like cigarette smoke after a match, and how many times have I heard it uttered with that lump rising in your throat, sudden, without warning. It's a question that brushes my heart like an ancient caress, and the answer is never clear-cut, never

definitive: it's a memory lost in the blurred contours of time, an emotion that changes color depending on how, within us, we have chosen to guard the meaning of that magic word: fantasista.

If we stop to look for the crudest truth, that of facts, here comes the first, painful regret: Pirlo, in the most classic and romantic sense of the term, was not one. Because the true fantasista, the one who made us dream as children with stickers and Sunday afternoons, was a pure number 10, a rebellious and brilliant soul who drew football between the lines, in that no man's land where only poets dare to venture. We still imagine him, like a beautiful ghost, with Baggio's suspended dribbles, that fear and wonder in his eyes, or Totti playing hide and seek with defenders, elusive as a thought. Even Pirlo, as a boy, had had that dream. At Inter, they had put him there, to play as a fantasista behind the strikers, trying to turn on the light, but something had jammed, like an old rusty mechanism.

Then came Brescia, the embrace of the province, and a man, Mazzone, who changed his life. He took him by the hand and moved him back, gently, as one accompanies a son towards a greater destiny. It was there that his story began to be written with different ink. And when Ancelotti, at Milan, refined that role, transforming him into that solitary playmaker in front of the defense, Pirlo didn't just "play" the fantasista: he walked away from it with an elegant step, reinvented himself with the grace of one who knows that life sometimes asks you to change paths to stay true to yourself. He wasn't its last heir; he chose an unexplored path, letting the others continue to dance up there.

So why, despite everything, does his name always return, like a melody you can't stop whistling, like the scent of an old love that never fades? Because Pirlo, even from afar, had the gaze of a fantasista.

That vision of the game that seemed to embrace the whole field in a single glance, that ball that seemed to speak to him, whispering secrets, the soft precision of his touches, the immense poetry of his fifty-six-meter passes and the magic of his free kicks, those curves implacable as destinies – they were the same soul, the same unmistakable DNA. He didn't just become a playmaker, he almost invented it, creating from nothing a new way of being brilliant. In a football that was beginning to run too fast, to demand breath and muscles, forgetting fantasy, he took that precious soul – imagination, audacity, the ability to decide a match with a single, perfect pass – and transferred it thirty meters back, put it under shelter, protected like a treasure in a crystal case.

And so, looking back, one almost feels a regret, a subtle and persistent melancholy, in thinking that Italian football, that romantic football made of long shadows and sunny days, stopped producing fantasisti towards the end of the Nineties, the beginning of the Two Thousands. Defenses tightened like too-tight meshes, the game became a frenzy, and in Serie A it became increasingly harder to breathe. Whether the last was Baggio, with his ponytail in the wind, or Totti, with his eternal Roman-ness, or Cassano, with his inconsistent brilliance, or perhaps this very reinvented Pirlo, perhaps it's just a way not to want to let go of an idea, a scent, a religion of football.

In the end, however, the most beautiful truth, the one that gently grips our hearts, is another: Pirlo was not the last fantasista. He was the one who showed us where brilliance could still survive, finding a new home, far from the noise. It was a melancholy and beautiful mutation, the last, luminous one, before the curtain slowly fell on that role, leaving us with the legacy of a man who, from afar, continued to see the world as only poets can.

12.

Now let's take a step back from the individual stories of these magnificent rebels and look at the broader picture. We have traveled through the lives of our unique artists—each a fantasista in their own right, each a bright flame that illuminated Italian football in their own special way. But as we close this chapter, a question hangs in the air, laden with melancholy: where have all the fantasisti gone? Why does modern football, despite all its athleticism and tactical sophistication, seem to have no more space for these creatures of instinct and genius?

Let us now reflect on the decline of the fantasista, examining the forces that have conspired to push these artists to the margins of a game that once celebrated them as its greatest treasures.

The Vanished Artist: An Elegy for the Fantasista

There was a time when Italian football was a living art gallery. Every

Sunday, the stadiums of Serie A filled not only with fans, but with connoisseurs, who came to admire the latest masterpiece painted by the latest genius. The trequartista, the fantasista, the number 10—call him what you will—was the heart of the team, the player who made the difference between a functional machine and a work of art.

But something has changed. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, these artists began to disappear. The canvas of the pitch, once free and open to interpretation, became a rigid grid of tactical instructions. The painter was told to become a cog. And the art, in too many cases, was lost.

The Tactical Evolution: The Death of Space

The first and most obvious culprit in the decline of the fantasista is the tactical evolution of the game itself. Today's football is a sport of geometries, pressing triggers, positional play. It's a game dominated by the ideas of coaches like Arrigo Sacchi, Pep Guardiola, and Jürgen Klopp—men who elevated tactics to a science, who leave nothing to chance.

In the era of Sacchi's Milan, the game became collective movement, compression of space, team defense and team attack. There was no more room for the player who stood still, who waited for the ball, who needed time and space to create. Sacchi himself said a famous phrase: "I never had a fantasista in my teams. I had eleven players who all knew what to do with the ball and without the ball." In his system, the artist was replaced by the intelligent worker.

Today, the evolution has gone even further. The pressing game has become so intense, so suffocating, that the old role of the attacking midfielder has almost become extinct. There is no longer the "hole" to play in—the space between midfield and defense has been compressed until it disappears by the incessant pressure of the modern defense. Players who once roamed free now find themselves hunted, surrounded before they can even receive the ball.

The Physical Demands: Athletes Above Artists

Alongside the tactical evolution came a change in physical demands. The modern footballer is first an athlete and then a footballer. Gone are the days when a fantasista could stroll around the pitch, conserving energy for the moment of magic. Today, every player is expected to run, press, track back, contribute defensively. The romantic image of the number 10 wandering the field awaiting inspiration has been replaced by the reality of the high-intensity, high-

press machine.

The statistics tell the story. In the 90s, a top-level midfielder might cover 8-9 kilometers per game. Today, that figure is closer to 11-12 kilometers, with repeated sprints requiring an almost superhuman level of fitness. The fantasista, by his nature, was not built for this. He was a player who conserved energy for the decisive moment, who moved in spaces, who preserved his explosive power for that dribble or that pass that would open the defense. In today's football, he's a luxury few teams can afford.

The Youth System: Producing Robots, Not Artists

Another factor in the decline is the way young footballers are trained. The modern youth system is a factory for producing functional, reliable, tactically disciplined players. From the age of eight, children are taught to play in systems, to follow instructions, to think collectively rather than individually. The freedom of the street, the unstructured creativity of the playground, has been replaced by the rigor of the sports center.

Where once a boy like Totti learned his craft on the cobblestones of Trastevere, where Cassano developed his dribbling in the alleys of Bari Vecchia, where Di Canio forged his character in the Spartan courtyards of Quarticciolo, today's young players are molded in the sterile environment of the academy. They are taught to pass, to move, to press, to follow the coach's instructions. They are not taught to dream, to improvise, to take risks. The result is a generation of players technically prepared but devoid of the one thing that made fantasisti special: the ability to create something out of nothing, to surprise, to astonish.

Economic Pressure: The Fear of Failure

There's also an economic dimension to the decline. In modern football, the stakes are higher than ever. Clubs invest millions in players and expect immediate returns. Coaches are hired and fired based on results, often with little patience for long-term projects. In this climate of fear and pressure, the fantasista becomes a risk. He's unpredictable, inconsistent, difficult to manage. He can produce a moment of genius, but he can also disappear from the game, or lose the ball in a dangerous area, or fail to track back when he should.

The safe option, the reliable option, is to build a team of functional players who follow instructions, work hard, and minimize risks. The fantasista, by his very nature, is the embodiment of risk. He plays on

the edge, and when he falls, he falls hard. In a game where a single mistake can cost a coach his job, the temptation to choose the safe option over the brilliant one has become overwhelming.

The Changing Role: The Evolution of the Number 10

The position itself has evolved. The classic attacking midfielder, playing behind two strikers, has been largely replaced by other configurations. The rise of the 4-3-3, with its emphasis on wide attackers and a single central striker, has left little room for the traditional number 10. Teams today often play with a "false nine" like the late-career Totti, or with offensive midfielders who are required to contribute defensively, or with deep-lying playmakers who dictate the tempo from deeper positions.

The modern number 10, when he exists, is a different creature. Players like Kevin De Bruyne or Bruno Fernandes are not fantasisti in the classic sense. They are athletes who can create, workers who can also produce moments of magic. They combine the running capacity of modern football with the vision of the old, but they lack the romantic, anarchic spirit of the true fantasista. They are hybrids, brilliant in their own way, but they are not the same thing.

The Cultural Shift: The Loss of Romance

Beyond the tactical, physical, and economic factors, there's a cultural shift that has contributed to the decline. Football has become a business, a global entertainment product, a commodity. The romance of the old game, the bond between player and fan, the feeling that the fantasista was one of us, a local hero playing with his heart as much as his feet—all of this has been diluted by the globalization of the sport.

The modern star is a brand, a global icon, a figure who moves from club to club in search of the richest contract. The loyalty of a Totti, the devotion of a Del Piero, the fierce local pride of a Di Canio—these qualities seem almost out of fashion in today's football. The fantasista was, in many ways, a product of his environment, rooted in a specific place, a specific culture, a specific way of life. As the game has homogenized, as local cultures have been absorbed into the global marketplace, the conditions that produced these artists have

disappeared.

The Rise of Data and Statistics

Finally, we must consider the role of data and statistics. In modern football, everything is measured, quantified, analyzed. Expected goals, pressing triggers, pass completion percentages, defensive contributions—all these statistics are used to evaluate players and shape tactics. The fantasista, however, does not always show up well in the numbers. He attempts difficult passes that may not come off. He takes risks that lead to losses of possession. He may wander out of position, or fail to track back, or lose the ball in dangerous areas. Data, which rewards reliability and consistency, often penalizes precisely the qualities that make the fantasista special.

The things that cannot be measured—vision, improvisation, the ability to create something from nothing—are the essence of the fantasista. But in a data-driven world, these intangible qualities are often undervalued, or simply ignored. The player who completes 90% of his safe, horizontal passes is rated more highly than the one who attempts the risky through-ball that succeeds only 30% of the time. The result is a game that has become more efficient, but also more predictable, more sterile, less beautiful.

A Light Fading

And so we arrive at the present moment, looking back at these magnificent artists—with a mixture of wonder and sadness. They were the last of their kind, the last flowers of a dying breed. The game that produced them has changed, perhaps forever. The conditions that allowed them to flourish—the freedom of the streets, the patience of fans, the tolerance for genius, the willingness to accept the flaws along with the brilliance—are largely gone.

There are still players who carry the flame, of course. Lionel Messi, in his own way, was a fantasista, even if he played in a different context. Neymar, for all his controversies, has the spirit of the street player. In Italy, players like Lorenzo Insigne or Federico Chiesa have moments of the old magic. But they are not the same. They are products of a different era, shaped by different forces, playing a different game.

The fantasista, in his purest form, is a creature of the past. He belongs to a time when football was slower, more forgiving, more romantic. He belongs to the era of black-and-white television, of cigarettes in dressing rooms, of players walking to the stadium through the streets, surrounded by the fans who adored them. He belongs to a world that

no longer exists, except in our memories and the stories we tell.

The Eternal Lesson

But perhaps that is precisely the point. The fantasista is gone, but his lesson remains. He reminds us that football is not just about winning, not just about tactics, not just about data and efficiency. It's also about beauty, creativity, that individual spark that can light up a grey afternoon and make 40,000 people rise to their feet in wonder.

He reminds us that the game, at its heart, is still a game. It's played by human beings, with all their flaws and contradictions, their genius and their madness. And in a world that increasingly values uniformity, predictability, and control, the memory of the fantasista is a precious thing—a reminder that the most beautiful things in life are often the most unpredictable, the most imperfect, the most human.

So let us cherish these memories. Let us tell the stories of Totti's no-look passes, of Del Piero's curlers from the left side of the box, of Cassano's impossible dribbles, of Di Canio's overhead kick and his act of sportsmanship. Let us keep the flame alive, even as the game moves on. Because the fantasista may have vanished, but his spirit—the spirit of creativity, of passion, of beautiful, reckless genius—will never truly die. It lives on in every child who kicks a ball in the street and dreams of becoming the next great artist. It lives on in every fan who still believes that football is more than just a game. It lives on in us.

The Nostalgia of the Exile: The Pain of Being Italian Abroad

There is a particular suffering in supporting Italy when you live far away. It's not the same as the fan who stays at home, who can share the disappointment with the barman, with a friend, with a neighbor. No, ours is a solitary, silent suffering, which we must carry like a weight every Monday morning, when we walk into the office and colleagues look at us with that little smirk, ready to throw a barb: "So, you lost again? Weren't you the world champions?"

And there we are, having to explain, to justify, to defend a flag that they only see through the results of the last few matches. They don't know what it means to be Italian. They don't know what it means to grow up with Baggio's goals, with Totti's magic, with Del Piero's free kicks, with the brilliant madness of Cassano and Di Canio. They only see the present, that humiliating present of World Cup eliminations, failed qualifications, embarrassing performances against teams we once didn't even consider rivals.

And we, Italians abroad, find ourselves in an impossible position. On one hand, we are ambassadors of our culture, proud to tell our history, our art, our cuisine, our football. On the other, we have to endure the scorn of those who only see the ruins of the present, without knowing the greatness of the past. Every defeat is a wound that reopens, every humiliation is an extra weight to carry.

The Italian Fan Abroad: More Catholic Than the Pope

And there's another thing, a thing that only those who live far away can truly understand. We Italians abroad, when a European competition arrives, suddenly become fans of all Italian teams. I, a Milan fan for life, the one who cried for Istanbul and rejoiced for Athens, the one who insulted Juve for decades, find myself cheering for the Bianconeri in the Champions League. Why? Because in that shirt, in those colors, I no longer see a rival. I see Italy. I see a piece of home. I see the hope that someone, somewhere, will keep high the flag that we desperately try to defend every day.

And when they lose, when they are eliminated, when they make pathetic showings, the disappointment is double. It's not just sporting disappointment. It's the awareness that the following Monday, in the office, colleagues will have another weapon to mock us with, another piece of evidence that "Italian football isn't what it used to be." And there we are, gritting our teeth, taking it, hoping for better times.

The Past That Won't Return: We Were, We Are No More

Perhaps, and it's painful to admit, we must start using the past tense. "We were" the strongest national team, "we were" the ones who won World Cups, "we were" the ones who had the most beautiful leagues in the world. Today we are none of that anymore. Today we are a national team that struggles to qualify, a league that has lost its allure, a football school that no longer produces fantasisti, only tactically disciplined little soldiers.

And this past, this "we were," is a boulder weighing on our shoulders. Because we remember. We saw Baggio lift the Ballon d'Or, we saw Maldini raise the European Cup, we saw Totti delight the world with his cucchiai. Our children, on the other hand, have seen none of this. Our children grow up with EA Sports, with virtual football, with video games where you can buy Mbappé and Haaland and build your dream team with fake money. For them, real football is what they see on the Playstation screen, not what is played on suburban pitches.

The Loneliness of Those Who Ask for More Italians

And then there's the thorniest issue, the one you touched upon with honesty and courage. Today I find myself in a silent minority, ever smaller, ever more isolated. I'm among those who still dare to ask: "Why are there no more Italians in Serie A?" I'm among those who look at the lineups of our teams and count the foreign players, and realize that often it's eleven out of eleven. I'm among those who remember when on Sundays, at the stadium, you'd see eleven Italian boys, often raised in the youth system, fighting for the colors of their city.

And today? Today, if you dare to say these things, if you dare to ask for more space for young Italians, if you dare to complain that our academies are full of random foreign players taken from abroad, you risk being labeled. "Racist," they say. "Nationalist," they say. "You're against multiculturalism," they say. And it's not true. It's absolutely not true. We love football, we love players from all over the world, we applauded champions like Maradona, Van Basten, Platini, Ronaldo. But we also love Italy. We love our identity. We love the idea that our national team can draw from a league that produces Italian talents.

This is not a matter of race. It's a matter of identity, of culture, of belonging. It's the same reason Brazilians want to see Brazilians in their league, Argentines want to see Argentines, Spaniards want to see Spaniards. It's the reason why La Liga, despite all its foreign stars, has always had a core of local talents. It's the reason why Germany, after the disaster of 2000, invested in their academies and today reaps the rewards.

The Generation Without Fantasisti

And then there's the biggest problem, the one that perhaps explains all the rest. The parents of today, those who bring their children to the pitch, who enroll them in football schools, have never seen the real fantasisti play. They grew up in a football already impoverished, already tacticalized, already globalized. For them, the height of flair is a functional player who occasionally scores a nice goal. They don't know what a true number 10 is, one of those who make you jump out of your armchair, who make you fall in love with football, who make you dream.

And so, their children grow up without role models. They grow up watching foreign stars on television, those who cost hundreds of millions, those who are already finished phenomena. They don't see the path, the growth, the academy kid becoming a one-club man. They only see the finished product, imported from abroad, ready for consumption.

And then there's EA Sports. There's the video game, with its modes, its packs, its virtual challenges. Children spend hours in front of the screen building their dream team, playing imaginary matches, collecting cards. Real football, the one you sweat for, live for, breathe, becomes secondary. It becomes boring, slow, less exciting than the virtual. And so, while they play with

Mbappé and Messi on the screen, on the suburban pitches our talents remain unexpressed, our fantasisti are not born, our football school continues to impoverish.

Is There Hope?

And so I ask myself, I ask myself every time I see another disappointing national team match, another Italian team eliminated from the cups, another lineup with eleven foreigners. Is there hope? Can we still reverse this trend? Can we ever go back to being what "we were"?

Perhaps yes, but it requires a profound, radical change. It requires someone to have the courage to say that our path no longer works. It requires clubs to invest in academies not just for numbers, but to form true talents. It requires parents to rediscover the pleasure of taking their children to the field, to teach them that football is not just a video game, but sweat, passion, sacrifice, shared joy.

It requires us to stop being afraid of words. That we can speak of identity without being accused of racism. That we can ask for more Italians on the pitch without being ostracized. That we can be proud of our flag, our history, our footballing culture, without this meaning being against someone else.

It requires children to dream again of becoming the next Totti, the next Del Piero, the next Baggio. Not the next Mbappé, not the next Haaland. They are great champions, but they are not ours. They don't speak our language, they don't breathe our air, they don't carry our colors in their hearts.

I, an Italian abroad, a Milan fan forever, the one who cheered for Juve or Inter in the Champions League just to see a bit of Italy win, will continue to hope. I will continue to defend our flag, even when it's mocked. I will continue to tell my children the deeds of the fantasisti I saw play, so at least they know what we have lost. And I will continue to hope that one day, not too far off, we can return to using the present tense. Not "we were." But "we are." Again.

[image]